

FALSE SPRING

BY
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Howard Coste

THE AUTHOR

Beatrice Kean Seymour dates her genesis as a writer from "those now, alas, far-off days when, as a very small schoolgirl, I spent a great deal of time that ought to have been devoted to higher things, in concocting tales for my class-mates." Since then she has never wavered from her ambition to be a writer. She trained as a commercial secretary, but in her spare time wrote short story after short story and put them away in a drawer. One day she won first prize in a literary competition. After that she began to get stories into some of the women's papers, and after her marriage, relieved at last from the need to earn her living, she found time to attempt her first novel, *Invisible Tides*, which was at once accepted by Arthur Waugh. Other novels of hers include *Interlude for Sally*, *Maids and Mistresses*, *Three Wives* and *Youth Rides Out* (No. 102 in this series).

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TO MY FRIEND
CONSTANCE' EVELYN REDFEARN,
WITH MY LOVE



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CHAPTER ONE

I

SOMETIMES it seemed to Virginia that the whole of her life had been shadowed by the figure of her Aunt Frank—that never at any time had the warm sun shone fully upon her, not even after Frances Hussey was dead, not even through the long years of her happy life with Charles and their young children. Always there had been something missing. Like a scarcely remembered curse, Frances Hussey's shadow had hung faintly over every inch of the way, so that sometimes it was for all the world as though Death had never knocked at her door, as if Virginia had not stood at her graveside that lovely Spring morning long ago, before there was any Charles Frome or any thought of anyone remotely like him, but only the wistful dream of a happy normal life, with a home of her own and children. Later, Virginia was a little disturbed to remember that on this day she thought far less of what her aunt had done with her own life than what she had been able to do with hers—Virginia's.

For what had happened years earlier to hers, Frances Hussey, of course, had always blamed her mother—Virginia's Grandmother Hussey, who did not know how to bring up her daughters and had never wanted them, anyway; who had never in all her narrow, selfish life cared for anybody but the handsome young son who was killed with Gordon at Khartoum in 'eighty-five, an event for which Grandmother Hussey always blamed Gladstone. "That's what comes of having a Liberal Government in power!" Not that Ruth Hussey cared for politics or knew anything about them; but like most women of her day she took the colour of her views on this topic from the family to which she belonged. The fact that her husband had been a Gladstonian only aggravated, if it did not actually explain, much else that was unsatisfactory about him. The death of her son, however, was a blow from which Ruth Hussey never recovered—not because she could not, but because it wasn't worth while. She was just fifty—and all that mattered in the world lay with her son John, in six feet of Egyptian soil.

Even as a child, Virginia vaguely understood that her Aunt

Frank hated Grandmother Hussey, and sometimes it seemed to Virginia as if she hated her, too. As she grew older she came to understand that to Aunt Frank she was only the sign and symbol of something that had spoiled her life, for Grandmother Hussey stopped one day in her own private unhappiness not so much to make clear to the child this point as to jab at the luckless Frances. "Your Aunt Frank hates you, my child, because your mother married the man she wanted. The Hussey women are all hussies, you know. . . . That's so, isn't it, Frankie?" Virginia never forgot the look which slipped over the cold, lovely mask that was Aunt Frances's face. Child as she was, it frightened her, opened to her young and very tender gaze the dark abyss of human passions. It was a sight spread frequently for those youthful eyes—when visitors came to tea and scraps of conversation were overheard, or when somebody commented upon her growing likeness to her dead mother. It needed nobody to tell Virginia that Aunt Frank hated the memory of her sister Philippa as deeply as she hated her mother. Sometimes, even in those early days, it must have seemed to Virginia that the world was not large enough for so much unkindness, that in a world where the sun shone and the Spring flamed across the land there must, somewhere, be people who cared for one another, who laughed and grew blithe and tolerant the one of the other. Surely, when the weather was warm and fine, when the daffodils nodded in the parks and the trees unfolded upon the soft air, even Grandmother Hussey and Aunt Frankie must think the world a pleasant place and life a better thing than they commonly supposed!

II

The problem of the young Hussey sisters was set many years before Virginia was born or thought of. Ruth, their mother—Virginia's Grandmother Hussey—had quarrelled from the first with her young husband—some said because of other women, some because of other men, some because of both. The birth of two girls within the space of the first five years of their marriage did not improve matters, for Ruth Hussey did not care for her own sex, thought there were too many women in the world already, and was annoyed to have added to their number. Her friends said she put the blame upon Stuart Hussey—that she declared he was just the kind of husband to have only girl-

children, and that she gave them their ridiculous names to spite him. It never seemed to occur, even to the people who knew her best, that she called them Frances and Philippa only because by shortening these to Frank and Phil she could persuade herself that she had a young family of boys growing up around her. Then, two years after Phil's birth, came the boy she had always wanted. She and Stuart quarrelled fiercely over his name, as they had quarrelled about most things else. Stuart Hussey insisted he should be called John Evelyn—John to save his own dignity and that of the boy, and Evelyn "to get his own back." Jack, Jackie, and John to his mother, he was never by his father called anything but "Eve." Thus did Stuart Hussey avenge himself for the masculine "Frank" and "Phil" of his young daughters—and for God knows what else beside.

The birth of this boy, however, was the end of the marital life of Ruth and Stuart Hussey, and, incidentally, of their life in the country. Ruth, at last, had got what she wanted most; and she intended to have also what she wanted next, a gay London existence. She hated the country, though she had always lived in it, and she hated Landor, which Stuart had taken for a long lease upon their marriage. Moreover, the tongue of the countryside was a good deal too long for Ruth Hussey, for all she smiled at the rumours concerning Stuart, and, too, at those concerning herself. It was Ruth herself who first made that bad joke, "This Hussey woman's a hussy." She liked to shock people. Approaching her thirtieth birthday, she was a vital, beautiful creature, built on a magnificent scale—dark, regal, imperious, daringly unconventional, and no countryside was ever wide enough to hold her. Her witty tongue made her friends, but it made her more enemies. Yet even the people who knew her best would scarcely have contended that she was either a good wife or a wise or unselfish mother. Save where John was concerned, it is doubtful whether she ever did a single unselfish thing. She acted on impulse: she did things for no better reason than that she wanted to do them, or out of mischief, and not infrequently, where the unfortunate Stuart was concerned, out of malice. For his good name or her own she had no regard whatsoever. She was a brilliant, unbalanced woman, living for admiration, with more energy than the motherhood and wifehood for which she was so profoundly unfitted, or her narrow, pleasure-seeking life could possibly absorb. She would doubtless have been a trial to some unfor-

fortunate man in whatever age she had lived, but to have contrived to get herself born in the year previous to that which saw the accession of Queen Victoria was probably the biggest blunder she ever made in her life. And second only to that was the mistake of permitting herself, at twenty-one, to marry Stuart Hussey, nearly fifteen years her senior and attracted, as she very well knew, by her physical charms—her dark, vivid looks, her curved and ample proportions, her exuberant youth and gaiety. Accustomed all her young life to the fact that men made fools of themselves over her, she was inevitably attracted to the one man she had ever met who appeared to find her less than the fascinating, dashing creature she knew herself to be. And perhaps, for Ruth Mayor was clever at reading men (were they not the one subject with which she had ever taken a moment's pains?), she knew that that cold, calm demeanour of Stuart's was a mask long before that night of her twenty-first birthday party when he risked her reputation (and his) by climbing in at her bedroom window and spending what remained of that festive night with her.

Romantic, hot-headed, over-excited and impulsive, she permitted him to announce their engagement the next day and was married to him within a month. "And after all," she was telling herself cynically less than a year later, "there was no need." Frances was not born until she had been married nearly three years; and by this time she detested her husband and despised him because he could not forget that night of her twenty-first birthday—because she knew that it had made it impossible for him to believe that he could trust her. After all, it wasn't her fault; he was older than she and ought to have known better. . . . Not that Ruth cared, so little was she of her day and generation. She did what she wanted and did not regret. What she could not forgive was that Stuart should so utterly have proved to her—and so soon!—how entirely he belonged to his.

III

She buried him, calmly and with dignity, but also with some satisfaction, in 'seventy-four, in his fifty-third year. Ruth was then thirty-eight. Frankie was fifteen and, in her mother's phrase, made a perfect little nuisance of herself over her father's death. He had, of course, spoiled and pampered her, played the child off against the mother, told her how good-looking she was

going to be . . . and told her—what else? And how much? Ruth wondered. Frankie had adored her father and her attitude to him and his to her was doubtless responsible for the marked hostility which existed between the child and her mother. At fifteen Frank was obviously marked for beauty. She had her father's features regularized and smoothed, and something of the same cold dignity which had once so attracted the impetuous Ruth and then so utterly repelled her. People told her that she'd not keep Frankie long—that she was made for an early marriage. She'd be lucky if she kept her two years. . . . Ruth, so much shrewder and cleverer than most of her feminine contemporaries, smiled at these things. Frankie was beautiful enough—but attractive to men? Ah, that was a different matter, which Ruth rather fancied she knew more about than they. But she hoped she was wrong. "Lucky if she kept her two years," did they say? Lucky, rather, if by then she had contrived to get rid of her.

Philippa, thirteen at the time of her father's death, was a different proposition altogether. In this affair of her parents she never took sides. Her father's kindness, his beautiful manners, his generosity, were nicely balanced, for her, by her mother's persistent youth and gaiety, by her witty tongue, her interest in pretty clothes and nice things to eat. She did not listen, very much, to the things Frankie said. Frankie, she knew, did not get on with her mother, but then—with whom *did* Frankie get on? Philippa had grown up with Frankie—had gone to school with her; and that, of itself, was probably a liberal education. Already there were things about Frankie nobody knew but her little sister. Not beautiful, as Frankie was, nor likely to be, she was immensely attractive, with a hint of autumn in her colouring and all the Spring in her eyes. She shared with her mother a tremendous zest for life: she was good-tempered, easily amused and accepted the conditions of her existence without the questionings and discontents, the cold insouciances with which her sister further disrupted an already sufficiently disturbed household. Ruth Hussey permitted herself to be amused by this younger daughter of hers, but upon her father's death packed her off, none the less, with her sister to a finishing school. The boy, so soon to die, who alone made that sixteen-year-old association with Stuart Hussey worth while, she continued to keep at home with a tutor until it was decided that he should go into the Army and was old enough to go up to Sandhurst. And by that time

Frankie was twenty-one, with her schooldays over for ever, and Phil's too; but she, at nineteen, had gone to spend a year in the home of a French girl she had known at school. It was always Phil who made these close and active friendships.

It happened that during this year of her absence Ruth Hussey became acquainted with a young concert singer named Brodie—Donald Brodie. He must, then, have been twenty-three or four, and he came, with some regularity, to the little house in Neville Gardens which already, shut up in it for so many hours a day with nothing to do, Frances Hussey was beginning to think of as a prison. For Ruth Hussey was right: Frankie was beautiful but not attractive. She had no girl friends and the young men left her alone. She had little or no social sense, neither cared for dancing nor danced even moderately well, and found herself continually cut out by her mother, who retained that infinite capacity for attracting men, even very young men like Donald Brodie. But Frankie could not forget that her mother was forty-four, and in the year 1880 the world agreed with her that to be forty anything, or even forty nothing at all, was to be distinctly old. Males her mother might still attract, for her hair had not greyed and her skin was still good, though she had got *much* too plump—but a young man like Donald Brodie? It could not possibly be for her mother that he came so frequently to that little Georgian house with its neat garden and its spreading beech, upon the confines of Kensington and Chelsea? Certainly he sat out with Frankie with some frequency beneath the beech tree in the Spring that followed the heavy flooding rains of 'seventy-nine, and Ruth Hussey smiled. Was Frankie really going to bring it off? Was this impressionable and personable **youth** with the shining hair and golden voice really going to allow himself to be snapped up? Ruth smiled again and looked wise and thanked God (and young Mr. Brodie) for the more amiable, less insolent Frankie who shared her meals those days. Then Philippa came home from France—and all was over.

There never was any hope for it after that first look Don Brodie and Phil Hussey took at one another. All her life Frankie could see the vision of Philippa coming, that first afternoon, down the stone steps that led on to the little lawn, out to the beech-tree where she sat with Don at her side. She heard his voice falter, stop . . . go on again somewhere else. It was an afternoon in late June, the sun was brilliant and deeply warm, and Phil, who

loved and flourished on the heat, was fittingly clad for it. Her frock was daffodil yellow, her hat black, and as she came down the steps she unfastened its strings and moved towards them swinging it upon her arm. All summer was in her hair, all Spring in her face and all grace and delight in the way she stepped, smiling, towards them. Something that had recently come to birth within Frances Hussey's heart sighed faintly and died. That Spring beneath the beech-tree was the last Spring of her life. . . .

Ruth Hussey, wicked woman that she was, decided to make a joke of it. She "talked" to the young and handsome gallant. Phil was but a child, and Frankie had given her to understand that he . . . that she . . . Young Brodie flushed, paled and flushed again . . . stammered his excuses, his apologies. He had never—only the merest tokens of friendship . . . the simplest politeness . . . the homage due to a young and beautiful woman. . . . Even if there had been no Philippa. . . . Ruth Hussey was not so sure; she knew her young man better than that, but she went on-being amused. Really, Frankie was already prepared to believe that her heart was broken. Quite a delicate situation. She hoped that the poor girl would be reasonable. . . . The young man fled.

Ruth continued all the summer to treat the situation as a joke. She did not believe that Frankie had any heart to inconvenience her (even if the heart was the seat of the emotions, which appeared to be doubtful). Frankie was—"like her father"—a cold, self-contained type, infinitely tiresome. As Ruth saw it, she hated losing young Brodie, not because she cared for him, but because he had represented her one channel of escape—and she knew that there might very well never be another. Ruth smiled as she reflected how very right she and not her friends had been about that. Frances Hussey, for all her beauty, did not attract men. She was the essential spinster, though as yet she did not know it. But Ruth Hussey knew it and found the present situation intriguing: moreover, it appealed to all that was malicious in her nature. She wanted to get rid of this elder daughter of hers, true, but there was something satisfying in keeping her when she wanted so much to be gone, in making things easy for Don and the amiable, light-hearted Phil. Therein, for Frankie, lay the sting. It might not have been true, as she alleged, that if her mother had handled the matter differently Don would, after

all, have married her; but it was certainly true that Ruth deeply and openly favoured his match with Philippa. Soon after Phil's twentieth birthday, she gave her blessing to the union, a wedding breakfast in its honour and, to Frankie, an unending justification for her undying hostility towards her.

But Don and Phil Brodie! Their golden youth wiped out the disappointed Frankie even as it wiped out the follies and crimes of the days in which they went to their happiness. The echoes of the Parnell Conspiracy trial had not yet wholly died away: the air rang with lamentations over the defeat at Laing's Nek and the disaster at Majuba Hill, but Don and Phil heard none of them. They shut themselves up for a fortnight in the country, emerged for a week's frantic farewell entertaining and went off to New York, in which city Don had engagements enough to last a year and hopes of making his fortune.

And in New York, one bright day in the winter, their little daughter opened her eyes. They called her Virginia, went a little mad about her, sent home a procession of infant photographs, but showed singularly little inclination to follow them. Three months after Don had signed a second contract which was to keep him in America for another two years, he was dead of fever, and Phil, maddened with grief, took the infection and survived him only a few days. They had been as happy as the day was long—and they had died before their first dream could begin even faintly to fade. Virginia went unscathed and was brought over at once to England to a Ruth Hussey still shrugging her shoulders a little at the rôle of grandmother, and regretting that Phil's baby was of the wrong sex, but gratified at her sunny prettiness, so like her mother's.

Phil's death did not seem greatly to have shocked Ruth Hussey: neither did she echo Frankie's statement that people who can't stay in their own country were asking for ills and sudden deaths, as though nobody who stayed quietly at home had ever suffered either. If fevers and sudden deaths, said Ruth Hussey, were your lot, you did not escape them. You could not, anyhow, whatever you did, escape what was coming to you. Fate was always cleverer than you. Phil and Don, she supposed, were as truly marked for their fate as was she for that nocturnal encounter with Stuart Hussey by which the note of her whole life had been set.

IV

The England to which Virginia, at fourteen months, was introduced was England in the winter of 'eighty-two, the year of the Phoenix Park murders, of Tel-el-Kebir and the occupation of Cairo. But Virginia did not care. England or America—it was all one to her. Even the pale, unsmiling countenance of Frances Hussey did not dismay her, though she stared at it with solemn eyes, as if it both puzzled and fascinated her. The nurse who brought her from America was retained to look after her. She was an intelligent young person, invariably cheerful (which was why poor Phil had chosen her), a little at a loss to associate this queer household with the young and joyous mistress she had known, but devoted to her child and relieved to find that the dark, pale woman Mrs. Hussey called by that absurd and unsuitable name did not in any way intend to usurp her duties or responsibilities. In fact, nobody seemed to trouble much about her little charge save the pleasant, handsome young man in uniform who came home sometimes, and for whom the house was turned upside-down by his mother, with parties, dinners and dances every night. John Hussey had been genuinely shocked at his sister's death, though Phil, grown-up, and a mother, was a stranger to him: it was Phil the gay and mischievous child who lived in his memory, and with it that one brief sight of her in all her wedding finery less than two short years ago. To nobody but John did the advent of Virginia seem a miracle. When he was at home he would come to play with her for hours, and Virginia, used to the attraction and homage of an adoring father, accepted her "Uncle Zack" with supreme satisfaction.

"Isn't she a darling!" he'd say. "I wish she were mine!"

Ruth Hussey, listening to him, would frown a little, then laugh ("My dear boy! What a thing to say!") and drag him away. She did not like these reminders that he must one day find a wife. She had long ago made up her mind that she would be perfectly impossible in the rôle of mother-in-law, though Jack told her, laughingly, that that was no reason why he should not essay that of husband. He was fond of his mother, but he did not intend that she should interfere with his life—as Frankie always averred she had interfered with hers. And he was quite in earnest when he said that he wished Virginia belonged to him. He had a passion for children. "I hope I have a youngster like that some day, anyway," he declared.

Don and Phil Brodie had been in their graves nearly two years and their little daughter was three, when Lord Wolseley headed the expedition to Khartoum that was to rescue Gordon, and Virginia's "Uncle Zack" went with it. Gloom seized upon the little house in Neville Gardens. Not alone now the dark, unsmiling face of Auntie Frank bending above Virginia, but that also of Grandmother Hussey. Oppressed by so much gloom, the young Virginia learned to cry and to scream, and to know what it meant to be shaken by an angry woman as if she were contending with something she could not withstand. Auntie Frankie. . . .

The man in the bright uniform did not come back. Alas, for all his dreams, he, too, like Gordon, laid his bones in a few feet of Egyptian soil, and that unnatural woman, his mother, who had lost a young daughter with so much *sangfroid*, was like to break her heart about it.

Unfortunately for everybody, however, she was not of those whose hearts do their breaking in silence, whose spirit ebbs with the oncoming tide of grief. Ruth Hussey, who cared now so little to live that everyday existence was a torture to her, made the lives of everybody about her a burden to them. Her temper raged like a tornado through the house. There were whole days when nobody dared go near her, when servants walked out one after the other, when nothing stood between her wrath and the young Virginia but Mary Chaney, the American nurse, whom no tempers and no gloom could persuade to turn down her charge. Old enough to remember the death of her father at Bull Run, beneath her calm and unemotional exterior there lurked a definite contempt for this strange lack of dignity in human adversity. But she thought of young Jack Hussey, with genuine regret, as another life offered to the great god Moloch. Yet, after all, what did Mrs. Hussey expect? Her son was a professional soldier. There were always wars . . . and it was the habit of men, alas, to get killed in battles. But Mrs. Hussey had never thought of that. She liked the gay uniform and the figure young Hussey cut in it. Did her thought never go any more deeply than that? Mary's mother had taught her to hate war and to despise it; but nobody, apparently, had ever taught Mrs. Hussey that. Nobody, if it came to that, had ever succeeded in teaching her anything—that really mattered.

So, whilst the tempest raged and waned, Mary Chaney stuck

to her job in this house of gloom in which the hostility between two women was so active and malignant it was like a presence. It poisoned the atmosphere, for Ruth Hussey knew quite well that her daughter considered she had been well and truly repaid for the malicious finger she had had in the pie of Frankie's life, and for the idolatrous love she had borne her young son, and for the wreck (as Frankie put it) she had made of her husband's life. Fate had taken from her as she had taken from others, the one thing in life she had ever truly loved—and see how she liked it! Frankie had no pity whatsoever for her mother. Her own unhappy life, withered like a fruit forgotten upon a tree, for ever prevented that. She was not sorry to see her broken and old at last, at fifty, for did it not mean that her determination to live for ever was broken too?—and Frankie wanted her mother dead.

V

But there were twelve years before Ruth Hussey died—twelve years in which she cursed Mr. Gladstone and railed at all her life; in which Frankie's cold beauty faded and went out like a lamp that lacked fuel, in which she took to religion and allowed her restless, hitherto unused energies to be absorbed by charity which never once, with Frances Hussey, began at home. Neither did her religion teach her forgiveness of the people, dead or alive, who, as she believed, had injured her. It merely deepened her belief that her mother and sister had been well rewarded for their treachery. God had indeed cast down the proud and exalted the humble; but how exactly that fiery temper raging through the house denoted defeat or in just what way Frances Hussey was entitled to give to herself the epithet of "humble" were two more of the unsolved mysteries of life.

Twelve years. Years, like most others, which witnessed annexations and wars; political elections and resignations; Commissions, political and agricultural; sensations and strikes and sudden deaths in high places. In them Queen Victoria celebrated her Jubilee: Parnell died—and Spurgeon; the Home Rule Bill was introduced, and Nansen started on his Arctic Expedition. The Duke of York got married. The Home Rule Bill passed the Commons and was thrown out by the Lords, and the Manchester Ship Canal was opened and the Tower Bridge. Japan declared war against China. In Russia a new Czar came to the throne; in France, Dreyfus (wrongfully, as it turned out) was

convicted of treason; in South Africa there was the Jameson Raid. And nobody, in that little house on the Kensington-Chelsea border, cared a rap.

From it Mary Chaney had departed when Virginia, at twelve, was sent away to boarding-school. Realizing that this was the best thing that could happen, Mary Chaney permitted herself at last to yield to her family's entreaties, and went back to America. Virginia cried then the first really painful tears of her young life, for Mary Chaney had been the only mother she had ever known, and all the love of her young life had been lavished upon her. But school, she discovered, was a pleasanter place than the little house in Neville Gardens, and, perhaps, after all, she might never need go back there. She would fall in love and get married and go to a home of her own and live happily ever after. . . .

That was Virginia's reaction, at twelve, to that house in which two women nagged at each other from morning till night. She had learnt, already, from her grandmother, that Aunt Frankie had wanted to marry the man her sister, Virginia's mother, had married, and that there'd never been anybody else who had looked at her, even briefly; and from her aunt, that her grandmother had been a "bad woman," from which Virginia had been allowed to deduce that too many men had looked at her, briefly or otherwise. "Now she's old and the men won't look at her any more and she's lost her son, the last one who'd have even known she was alive."

Mary Chaney had tried to counteract the effect of these things by saying that both Mrs. Hussey and her daughter had spoiled their lives by believing that they had none at all save through their relationship with men. Women had to learn to build up lives of their own, to be less dependent upon their personal relationships. When Grandmamma Hussey and Aunt Frankie had been young that hadn't been very easy, but nowadays it was better, and by the time Virginia was grown up would be better still. Virginia had not understood very much of all this, but there was one phrase which Mary Chaney used which lived for ever in her mind. "This is a woman's world as well as a man's. At least, it was *meant* to be."

Between the years of Mary Chaney's departure and Grandmother Hussey's death, Virginia only went home from school upon two occasions. She did not mind that at all, for there was nothing to go home for now that Mary had gone. She could not

bear the atmosphere of hostility that lived in that little ugly house, and had only begun to realize how effectually Mary had stood between her and the brunt of it. Somehow it seemed as if, before the quiet demeanour of a Mary Chaney, the devils which possessed Ruth and Frances Hussey had held themselves, ever so little, in check. But now nothing stopped them, and Virginia could not bear it. She was glad when a belated attack of measles kept her at school at the Easter, and after that was lucky to have invitations which took her to the happier homes of other people.

And when she went home at Christmas, eighteen-ninety-six, Grandmother Hussey lay dead in her bed. She had died with the utmost indifference, and her face, even as she lay dead, seemed to wear upon it the last flicker of contempt for the thing life had been. If she had ever been young and beautiful—and she had, as Aunt Frankie had averred—surely she had forgotten it? Virginia, gazing so much against her will upon that dead face, thought her terribly ugly. She was very frightened and every nerve in her body shrieked a protest, cried out for the lovely thing, which, despite that dead face, she somehow knew life might be. Was she to be shut up here, for ever, with nobody in the world but her Aunt Frank? All her life Virginia remembered the way she had turned and rushed out of the room, out of the house, hatless, uncaring, the tears running unheeded down her face. She had sat in Hyde Park until people, all with different kinds of smiles upon their faces, began to come up and speak to her; when, more frightened even of what was outside that little house than of what was in, she turned and ran home again.

Under the terms of Stuart Hussey's will Ruth had no power to disinherit her daughter—and Frankie smiled as she thought how bitter that knowledge must have been to her. The whole of Stuart's estate passed to his children upon the death of their mother, and Frankie found that for the first time in her life she had money enough and to spare, even though Ruth Hussey had impoverished her estate first by the extravagance of her earlier years and latterly by the complete lack of interest she took in her affairs. Often enough had Frankie cursed the optimism which had led her father to make such generous provision for her in the event of her marriage (which, like everybody else, he regarded as an early certainty) and had left her nothing at all of her own (while her mother lived) if the event did not take place. All the time that money which would have meant so much to her had

lain in the bank awaiting the arrival of the husband who never came. Years ago Phil had taken the marriage portion allotted as her share and spent it. The young Virginia, ignored by her grandmother, was penniless save for the very small sum standing in the Bank in her parents' names at the time of their death and which under the terms of her mother's death-bed will had followed her to England and been banked here unconditionally in Virginia's name.

Virginia . . .

Frances Hussey looked at her with a close and careful scrutiny. Phil's child—and Don's. She had never really taken a good look at her before. Not beautiful. She hadn't a good feature, but she had Phil's autumnal colouring and her frank, vivid look. Sometimes Frank Hussey thought that the years had slipped back and that it was Phil herself who stood there looking at her—a quieter, more contemplative Phil who already, at fifteen, knew that life could be ugly and disappointing.

VI

Frances Hussey sold the house in Neville Gardens and went off to live in the country, where she put up for herself an ugly, modern-looking house not more than five miles from Landor, the country-house on the Surrey-Hampshire border which Stuart Hussey had taken upon his marriage and in which all Ruth's children were born. Frank Hussey's recollections of this house were not too definite—she was barely seven when her parents moved to town; but it pleased her to be able to refer glibly, in her new ugly drawing-room, "to Landor, which my father had when I was a girl. . . ." For Frank, here, was in her element. She could patronize and impress. Miss Hussey, of Cedars Lodge, was a person of substance and importance. She had, at long last, found her niche in the world; but it was too late for it to do anything for her disposition, which had suffered dangerously in the finding.

Virginia went back to school for another year, but was expected to spend all her holidays at Cedars Lodge and was not, after one unfortunate experiment, encouraged to bring her young friends with her. Bridget Lane's one visit was sufficient for Frank—and for Bridget. Neither, after that, would Virginia have asked any other of her friends to come. It was too dull, and Aunt Frankie altogether too unreasonable. There was

nothing whatever the matter with Bridget, even if she did kick her legs about, sing the popular songs, and flirt with young men whenever she had the chance. After all, times had changed. It was more than sixty years since Queen Victoria came to the throne—and besides, Bridget and she were young. Why shouldn't they do these things? Where was the harm? Young men, Virginia felt, were rather fun. Her Aunt Frankie couldn't mean that never, when she came home for good, would she be able to have any young men friends of her own?

Aunt Frankie did.

Virginia left school in the summer of 'ninety-eight and for the next few months kicked her young heels in idleness. When she was not paying dull calls with her aunt, going to church or taking soup and flannels to the afflicted, there simply was nothing whatever to do. The natural rolling beauty of her surroundings, of this new country of dark pines, golden gorse and of bracken, heather, ridge and vale, was the only consolation she had for her perpetual sense of wasted days and wasted youth, and her aunt disapproved tremendously of her long walks alone out on the open commons. What, in the name of goodness, did she find in walking there alone? Unless, perhaps, she *wasn't* alone?

Something in the expression of voice and face called up the hot blood into Virginia's cheeks and something, too, of her Hussey temper. Of course she was alone—worse luck! For whom was there to meet? She didn't know anybody that mattered—nobody, anyway, she'd care to be seen dead with.

"Don't dare to talk to me like that!" said Frankie.

"I will," said Virginia. "I think you're disgusting. I . . . I wish you were dead!"

She was abruptly frightened at the sound of her own words—not because of what they meant, but of what she glimpsed behind them, at the sudden sense she had of their inevitability, as though in her own being she somehow completed a cycle—some hideous design Fate was weaving in which she was no more than a *motif*. Everybody in this horrible family came to the point when they wished somebody else dead, somebody who thwarted and spoiled their lives.

She went meekly out of the room when her aunt recovered sufficiently to order her there. She had seen, not as in a glass, darkly, but in one blinding flash, precisely what her life was going to be unless, somehow, she could escape. But she

remembered something Grandmother Hussey used to say: "You can't escape your fate. Don't imagine it. It's always cleverer than you!"

The sport of Destiny! Nobody should make her believe it. She would escape. Lying there through the night, wide awake, her door locked against her aunt, she mentally shook her fist in her face. "You shan't—you shan't. I won't let you! My life belongs to me. I'll fight you for it!"

She was not quite seventeen, in open rebellion, and with a young heart that craved for a little joy and kindness, that was full of the desire to love and to be loved. Nobody, if you came to think of it, ever had his path made quite so smooth for him as Stacey Russell.



CHAPTER TWO

I

VIRGINIA saw him first on one of her walks. But it was not the first time he had seen her. He came frequently to stop with the Eliots, who had the big stone house at the end of the village, and had seen her at her aunt's side in church, to which some contingent of the End House repaired on Sabbath mornings, after which they played tennis for the rest of the day, or otherwise followed the desires of their own hearts with a free conscience. "Doing the handsome by the Almighty," Stacey Russell called this, but not to Virginia.

Liking the look of her, he had made the most of his opportunities in church and cannoning into her one windy October morning as he rounded a path on the common, head down, he made also the most of his apologies. Virginia blushed, and though this was a day when women still practised the accomplishment, her blushing pleased Stacey so much that he found it difficult to take his eyes off her face. He thought: People ought to be engaged to say scandalous things all day to her—to make her blush like that. He said:

"I've seen you in church, haven't I?"

"I expect so," she replied,—and the genesis of her faint, slow smile trembled for an instant upon her face, enchanting him.

"Your aunt's great on the church, isn't she?"

Virginia nodded. Her smile came up again, slow, very sweet, complete.

"Do you know her?"

"Not personally—I don't live here, you know. The friends I stay with—Captain Eliot and his wife—often speak of her."

"Oh—the End House, isn't it—where they play tennis all summer on Sundays?"

Stacey laughed.

"Your aunt doesn't approve of that?"

"She doesn't approve of lots of things. . . . I don't think she thinks people ought, ever, to do the things they really like."

"Doesn't she like going to church?"

"Oh, yes . . . now."

Stacey, a little nonplussed by the strange knowledge of human nature contained in that one little monosyllable and the definite pause before its utterance, found himself merely standing there smiling at her; and partly to extricate himself from an awkward moment, partly because the moment offered a very excellent opportunity, he suggested that they should walk on together. He wondered if she would observe, truly, that they were going in opposite directions; but she did not. She merely said quietly: "I'm afraid I am going rather far . . ." and waited for him to decide.

Eustace Russell entirely forgot he had previously decided that the wind was altogether too strong for further pedestrian exercise, and had already turned in the direction of home. He turned again at once and walked on by her side in her direction, not unmindful of the fact that she had obviously not even thought of turning in his.

Eustace Russell was bored. Many things bored him, and at frequently recurring intervals, but particularly just now he was bored with Ethel Eliot and her friends and had begun to wonder why he continued to accept her invitations. Strange that he had ever thought her an attractive, interesting woman, able in some measure at least to console him for what he called vaguely the central failure of life. Ethel was interested in nobody but herself, and very tiresomely needed consolation for her own "central failure." Had there really been a time when he thought that perhaps they might find it together? As he looked at the fresh young face at his side he thought that a quite fantastic idea.

"What do you find to do with yourself down here?" he asked Virginia as they walked on, buffeted by the wind, clinging to their hats at corners, shouting at each other a little of necessity.

"Nothing," said Virginia. "That's just it."

"Is that why you come walking?"

"Oh, I think I'd always want to go walking."

"Alone?"

"I'd rather walk alone than with the wrong people."

"Ah!" said Stacey Russell.

"I mean, with people who don't really *care* for it, or who never look at the scenery, like my Aunt Frank."

They were walking this afternoon by Vale Wood to Black Down—a favourite walk of Virginia's and taken frequently because of the panorama of the Surrey and Sussex Weald, which

opens out at the summit of the Down.

"You like scenery, do you?"

"I like this. It's all I know."

"Don't you ever go to town?"

"To London? I used to live there. We only came here two years ago, when my grandmother died. But my aunt lived in this neighbourhood when she was a little girl. My grandfather rented Landor at that time."

"Landor! Did he, by Jove! That's a nice place."

"Is it?" Virginia laughed. "The walls are too high, I can't see over."

"Doesn't your aunt visit there?"

"She doesn't visit very much anywhere, you know. . . . I don't think she very much approves of the people who live at Landor now."

"A bit of a dragon, this aunt of yours, isn't she?"

Virginia made a moue—a child's expressive face of dismay.

"Well, she doesn't like people who don't go to church and who play tennis or golf on Sundays . . . and she doesn't like the 'modern girl.' "

"And what is that, exactly?"

"I don't know. I think it's what Bridget is. . . . Bridget was a school friend of mine. . . . She used slang, went to theatres and dances and knew a lot of young men and read novels—Ouida and Mrs. Henry Wood and George Egerton."

"Good lord—don't *you* do any of these things?"

"Yes, I read novels."

"For instance?"

"Well, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë . . . Dickens."

"That all?"

Virginia wrinkled her brows.

"There's a good deal of them."

"Don't you read any moderns? Ever read du Maurier's *Trilby*, for example?"

"I don't think so. . . . I've read Robert Louis Stevenson a little—somebody once lent me *The Ebb Tide*. But we don't subscribe to Mudie's."

Stacey Russell fairly groaned.

"My poor child!" he said.

They deserted the realm of literature for that of the drama.

"Haven't you ever been to a theatre?"

"Ever such a few, not counting the pantomimes—in London that was, when Grandmother Hussey was alive."

"Is Hussey your name?"

"No. Brodie. Virginia Brodie."

Stacey looked relieved. "The old lady was a student of drama, was she?"

"Oh no, but she liked all the jolly things Aunt Frank doesn't. At least she did until my uncle Jack was killed at Khartoum, when I was a baby. But it wasn't my grandmother who took me to the theatre. It was my governess—and she went back to America when I was twelve. And once or twice I went with Bridget Lane when I stayed with her at holiday times. Once we all went to see *The Geisha*, with Marie Tempest and Huntley Wright."

"And Hayden Coffin. I bet you fell in love with him, didn't you? You know they say the girls cry if he doesn't appear at his matinees."

Virginia said simply: "He sings beautifully, but I think I preferred Cyril Maude in *The Little Minister*."

"Ah . . . you saw that, did you?"

"I got into trouble about it. Aunt Frank was horrid to Bridget over it. She never came again. And now she's going to be married next year."

"Is she, by Jove! And are you going to follow her example?"

Virginia laughed—the simple laughter of intensely amused youth.

"Heavens, no! Why, I don't know any men!"

"I see. The aunt doesn't approve of men either, eh?"

"I don't think she does, very much. And anyway she'd say I was much too young."

"Are you?"

"I don't know. I'm seventeen this year."

"Wouldn't you like to know a few people—and go to some dances?"

Virginia's laugh peeled out again. "Why, I can't even dance."

"Oh—you'd soon learn. Nothing easier. . . . Look here, we've got to get properly introduced. I'll get my friend Mrs. Eliot to invite your aunt and yourself to tea. And after that, well, we'll see."

"It would be lovely, of course," said Virginia, her eyes dancing.

"Only I know Aunt Frank will never come."

"Don't be too sure," Stacey Russell said. "My word, this is something like a view!" They had come up to the summit of the common and the panorama of the weald had spread out suddenly before them. But Stacey Russell didn't look very long at the view: his eyes strayed to the rapt young face beside him. He looked at it with the appraising gaze of a connoisseur. A charmingly modelled face, good eyes, a most kissable mouth, and colouring like the October morning. The little gold-brown curls that blew out beneath her hat made him wish she would take off her tam-o'-shanter—so much prettier than the average hat. With hair half as pretty as hers obviously was, most of the young women he knew would have found some excuse for doing so. But Virginia stood there looking at the view as though she could never have enough of it, and when she turned away walked on in silence, with a little air of abstraction Stacey Russell found annoying. He wondered what she'd do if he stopped suddenly, took her in his arms and kissed her.

Virginia—Virginia Brodie. He liked Virginia. It suited her. Virgin soil . . . every inch of her. Utterly innocent and unspoiled. And lovely. He'd never met anybody quite like her. Impressionable, too, surely, for all this cool abstracted air she now wore, as if she'd forgotten all about him. His mind was made up. Ethel Eliot would have to do what he wanted. She'd sulk a bit and show her teeth—trust Ethel; but she should do what he wanted. She should invite these people—this girl and the dragon-aunt—to tea, to dinner, to anything, everything. . . . Virginia Brodie was the most exciting thing he'd encountered for years. Why, she knew nothing, had been nowhere, had hardly seen a man.

He had sense enough to keep these things out of his face as he bade her good-bye half an hour later at the cross-roads. The gentle pressure of a hand upon hers, the kind, interested look in a pair of dark eyes, the gesture with which a hat was raised, the low tones of a friendly "au revoir" lived with Virginia all the way home and stayed with her throughout the tedium of an evening devoted, as usual, to the under-clothes of the poor of Lodshott.

How long ago it seemed since Aunt Frank had said she couldn't see what she got out of walking about alone, "Unless, perhaps, she *wasn't* alone" . . . and since she, very pink and angry, had retorted: "I think you're *disgusting*!"

Meeting strange men, walking and talking with them . . .

Dec. 20: 1619

Disgraceful, Aunt Frank would say.

So like Aunt Frank to make it plural, in that fashion. She'd met *one man only*—somebody young, good-looking and with nice manners. The first person, since those early days with Bridget Lane and her family, who had ever seemed to notice she was there. Her heart beat very loudly as she said, greatly daring:

"Aunt Frankie, do you know the people who live at the End House?"

"We do not."

"Why?"

"Because I do not choose."

"But they come to church."

"Yes—as if it were a garden-party."

"Oh, I thought *she* looked awfully pretty on Sunday."

"Looking pretty is not part of a woman's duty in God's house."

"But you can't *help* it if you do, Aunt Frankie. . . ."

"You can keep your mind on higher things. . . . Besides, Mrs. Eliot isn't of our class. It's common knowledge that Captain Eliot married beneath him."

Virginia burst out laughing.

"That's like Mrs. Fisher. She was talking about Mrs. King the other day to somebody and she said: 'Poor dear Mrs. King . . . of course one *can't* know her here, but in our heavenly kingdom . . .'"

Said Frances Hussey: "Mrs. Fisher was indiscreet, but she was right. Mrs. King *is* an impossible woman. Lots of women are. So pushing . . . so completely lacking in social tact."

"But why should we suppose she'll be any better up above?"

"I don't—Mrs. Fisher was unduly optimistic."

Virginia smiled. She wondered as she had often wondered before if Aunt Frankie's God possessed a sense of humour.

II

The Stacey Russell affair. . . .

How exactly like many another of its kind it must have been, and yet, those Spring days of 'ninety-nine, how marvellously unique it must have seemed to the young Virginia.

The social thread which Eustace Russell had intended Ethel Eliot to weave between Cedars Lodge and the End House had been

duly accomplished. Once, twice, three times in so many months, Frances Hussey had been graciously pleased to take her niece there to tea. Once, twice, grudgingly, she had permitted the girl to go there to a "simple evening party." Ethel Eliot gave donations to her various funds. Once she opened a bazaar. "The woman has money to spend . . . and the Lord's work has to be done," said Auntie Frank, who was not above taking the devil's money for it. She did not care for Stacey Russell or his rubbishy books—there were too many novels in the world already. She did not know how eagerly Virginia devoured the copies he lent her, nor how earnestly, if shyly, she talked about them with Stacey himself. Nor did Frances Hussey lay eyes upon the volumes of Hardy, of George Egerton, of this new young man, Somerset Maugham and others which Stacey lent her, for poor Virginia's literary education, like her emotional, went on by subterranean channels. Caught up in this new and wonderful atmosphere of colour and life and new interests, Virginia lost her heart completely to the donor of her good fortune. .

And then, quite unexpectedly, it appeared that Frankie "knew." "What is this I hear about your gallivanting about the country with this man Stacey Russell?" she calmly inquired one day.

"We do sometimes go for walks," Virginia admitted.

"You will kindly cease the objectionable practice immediately, then," Aunt Frankie said.

"But why? We don't do any harm."

"I should hope not. But I don't choose to have my niece careering about the country with a married man."

The shot was well-timed. The blanched face of the young Virginia told her all she had wanted to know, before that stammering blushing, "It's not true . . . it *can't* be true. . . ."

"Of course it's true, though doubtless it suits his purpose better to keep that piece of information to himself."

"Who told you?"

"What has that to do with it? You can put this man out of your mind at once. This family has suffered too much from its women, but they were badly brought up. You've not *that* excuse."

Virginia's face was very pink. But she was used to the veiled hints regarding her mother and grandmother and had learned to disregard them. She had nothing to say.

Frances Hussey, however, had a good deal and forgot none of it. And at the end she delivered her deadly blow with the utmost unconcern: "However, I gather from Mrs. Eliot that Mr. Russell is leaving to-morrow morning, so doubtless he will transfer his attentions to some other stupid and flattered young woman."

Virginia sat very still, the colour deep in her lovely young face: her heart beating so fast that it was like a pain in her breast. She remembered that she and Stacey were due the next afternoon to go for another walk. It could not be true, at least, that he was really going away without letting her know, without saying good-bye. . . . It was not. Ethel Eliot, seeing that she had perhaps gone too far and knowing of the intended walk the following day and that Frances Hussey would prevent any further meetings, had anticipated his departure in her conversation by a few hours. Stacey, useful and charming creature though he was, had been very annoying: she had, ever so slightly, to spoke his wheel. Besides, Stacey had nothing to offer this girl: his wife would never let him go. Much better to stick to women like herself, who were quite safe, didn't "imagine" things, were adequately equipped with husbands and in need of no more than an admiring cavalier.

So Aunt Frankie, secure in the belief that the morning train had taken the dangerous Russell to London, went off calmly enough to her sewing-meeting. And Virginia, with a fast-beating heart, went to meet a Stacey already forearmed by Ethel's carefully worded warning.

They went, that afternoon, to a favourite spot by a path which ran steeply up to a flat tableland from which the whole of Woolmer Forest, the North and South Downs and the chalk escarpment which connects them, the wooded height of Noar Hill and the bold outline of Selborne Hanger can be seen. And up there, on a warm Spring afternoon, Stacey Russell was pleasantly confirmed of a belief he had long harboured—that he held this young girl's heart in his hand. He had deceived her, she said. She hadn't known about his wife, and now, of course, they must never meet again. . . . Up there in all that wind and space she wept a little, most incongruously.

"Not meet again? Why ever not?" asked Stacey simply.

"Oh dear!" said Virginia faintly, "if you have a wife then you can't possibly love me. . . ."

"That's a very unlikely argument," he told her. "Marriages are sometimes a mistake. Mine was. My wife's a delightful woman. . . . I've nothing against her—far from it—but she doesn't understand me. I'm not at all what she wants. She lives her own life—I haven't much of a place in it."

Her grave eyes reproached him.

"Why . . . *why* didn't you tell me?"

"My dear child! I didn't want to discuss Sylvia with anybody—least of all with you!"

Virginia, very near tears, said nothing.

"Darling child, surely you must see that even now I can't do that," Stacey said, and proceeded to do it. To some purpose. The old story. The misunderstood husband, the affinity met too late. But Virginia, as she listened, was drowned in sympathy. He was unhappy. He was fettered. So was she. He cared for things in that passionate, headlong fashion in which, all her life, she too had done. He deepened in her romantic young heart her longing for a life understood not at all by a Frances Hussey, and aroused in her that deep yearning to be approved, admired and loved which had never, in all her seventeen years, been even partially gratified. But above everything else there shone in her that desire to help, to "make up" to somebody to whom she was grateful, for all the things she believed him to have missed. Her heart rose and fell in her breast when he lamented that the fates had been so unkind, that she should have been in the cradle when he was looking for a wife. . . . Not quite, she said, with the enchanting smile which made Stacey feel he would go to the stake for her; he was only seventeen years older than she, after all. . . .

The Spring of 'ninety-nine was hardly done when Frances Hussey realised that the friendship she thought she had so successfully nipped in the bud was still alive and flourishing so thoroughly that all Lodshott rang with its story. But throughout the painful interview which followed this discovery Virginia's romantic heart never wavered. She had a sense of something primitive and fundamental to uphold her. She supported life against death—opposed her youth to the rigid maturity, which, in place of hers, had descended upon her aunt at twenty-one. An infinitely touching thing that youth of Virginia's—a miracle she had somehow safeguarded all these years from the withering touch of a Ruth and Frances Hussey, of that house in Neville

Gardens and of that other which stood, like a defiance, in the midst of a surge of beauty. Queer the Fates should have decided that it should be dropped, like a jewel into a cave, into the keeping of a Eustace Russell. Queer that Virginia, so clear-sighted in her maturity, so that, looking back, she saw always that dark shadow of her aunt standing like a threat at the very threshold of life, should not have seen through Stacey Russell. Meeting him at thirty, at twenty-five, Virginia might well have paraphrased the reply of Christina of Milan—Holbein's Duchess—to Henry the Eighth of England's marriage proposal. "Had I two heads one should be gladly forfeit to His Majesty." "Had I but two lives, two youths . . ." Virginia might have said; but perhaps she knew, much earlier, how small a part of her life Stacey Russell had really had.

III

It created, nevertheless—that Stacey Russell affair in Lodshott—a nine days' wonder, for in spite of all the more daring spirits had done towards the broadening of the public mind on the question, the public mind remained pretty much what it had always been. It persisted in giving a lip-service to marriage and in demanding it from others. Virginia Brodie had unmistakably put herself outside the pale in going to live with a man who was already accommodated with a wife. She had completely "done for" herself. Lodshott put its collective head in the air and would have tossed it at her should she have come walking again in its wide, tree-lined village street.

But Virginia did not come walking in Lodshott. She went to Gravedona at the far end of Como, with Stacey, where they lived in the inn which looked over the lake. Stacey wrote in the one, bathed in the other, rowed Virginia about on it in a boat she was disappointed to find was not called a gondola, and made love to her when it pleased him, which was often enough. They lived there very cheaply, which was just as well, for Stacey Russell had not published a book for some time, and money was never his strong suit. When even the cheap rates of the inn at Gravedona could not be met, Virginia sent for the money still in an English bank in her name. Stacey made a good deal of fuss about this before the money came, but a good deal less when it arrived. No artist could be expected, after all, to do his best work if he were worried about money. Virginia concurred.

She poured out her money as she had poured out herself before him, and went on being happy like a bright bird in the sun or a lizard sunning itself on a wall. For she *was* happy. She never doubted it. Stacey Russell was a charming companion and a delightful lover—when the right mood was upon him, when it gave him pleasure to be these things. He had what, in those days, would not be called “sex appeal.” He was tall, with not a superfluous ounce of flesh on his lithe body, and though not handsome, he was immensely attractive to the young Virginia, who thought what she read in his deep-set eyes was unhappiness, and did not know that it was the discontent of the egotist who eternally regrets that the world was not made more to suit his special requirements, which meant in Stacey’s case, money growing on trees and adulation in the eyes of all women under forty.

There was enough of it, certainly, that early summer of ’ninety-nine, in the eyes of Virginia—so very much under forty. She adored him, and he had not then begun to grow tired of her adoration. He admired her, too: the chestnut-brown of her hair, her dark eyes, that fair warm skin, faintly browned now by the Italian sun, and all the curving beauty of approaching eighteen. It was his—to do what he liked with.

“My adorable Jinny ” he called her, and brought up upon her face that look of happy delight he knew so well. She had never been happy until this—and now it seemed to her that nobody had ever been so happy in the world before.

Stacey was happy, too, for never before had the wheels of life been so comfortably oiled. Virginia’s money had made all the difference. Of course, when his book was finished he intended to return every farthing they spent of it to her, but meantime it paid their weekly bills, kept a bottle of the more expensive local wine upon his table and took from him all necessity to think of the less comfortable side of life. Here at Gravedona, at the inn at the far end of the lake, with Virginia’s lovely self and Virginia’s useful patrimony, it was very comfortable indeed; and love was an ornament a man wore, like a jewel, upon his finger.

IV

Virginia had completely forgotten her angry, outraged aunt. She was no more *than* a figure in a bad dream. She didn’t write to her—not even to tell her that Stacey was asking his wife to divorce him, and that, when she did, she and Stacey would of

course be married; for she had forgotten not only that she had an aunt, but that Stacey had a wife. What did it matter? If she wouldn't divorce him they would probably never go back to England (the people there were, as Stacey said, so narrow-minded about things like that). But what would it matter if they didn't? It was lovely there at the end of the lake, with Stacey. It never occurred to her that she—or he—would ever get tired of it. She thought she loved the deep blue of the lake, the white snow-capped peaks that ran up into the blue of the sky, better than the commons of the Surrey-Hampshire border; that she didn't care if she never saw them again.

But one day she inconsequently remembered the sight of a full moon riding hard and fast, with one guiding star, through a windy sky that bent above Black Down; and for a brief space her heart ached—she didn't know why.

But there was a full moon that night over Como, and she went out on the lake with Stacey and looked at it. From the little village the sounds of voices, in talk and laughter, came across the water to them, very clearly, but out there on the lake they were in a world of their own. The Italian night, deep and blue, lay all about them. And happiness that was sharp and positive, a thin, sweet ecstasy of happiness. The moon shone on Stacey's thin face, blanching its sunburn, and upon his long white hands, idly moving the sculls, and her heart moved in her breast and her tender mouth said his name, softly, as though it were a benediction breathed upon the night.

"Stacey . . ."

"Yes?"

"Nothing—only just 'Stacey.' . . . I just wanted to say it."

He smiled at her so that again her heart moved in that painful fashion in her breast. Words left her.

"Want to go in?"

"Not yet. It's lovely out here."

"Divine. . . ."

She heard the water lapping softly, coolly against the side of the boat. A lovely world—and this a lovely spot they'd found in it. It could not possibly matter that they never went back to England. There was nobody there who mattered, or who cared where she was. And never could they grow tired of Gravedona.

V

As a matter of fact, Stacey was already getting a little tired of it by the end of September, and Sylvia's quite affable refusal to divorce him did not seem, after all, to matter very much. He liked that affability, too—and the calm way in which she dismissed this *grande passion*. Sylvia had her points, difficult though she had been to live with upon an insufficient and uncertain income. She did not create scenes about the wrong things, anyway, as, he was inclined to think, the young Virginia might very well do. She'd give him a year, she said, to think it over. A year was a long time. . . . The Sylvian implications of that phrase were not lost upon Stacey, but he preferred not to think of them. For he did not need to "think over" Virginia. He did not intend to get tired of her, but he was, just a little, tired already of Gravedona, its blue lakes and ice-capped mountains, which he never wanted, Virginia had found, to climb. Divorce or no divorce, he would suggest going back to England directly the weather broke. Virginia's reception of Sylvia's decision about the divorce inclined him to think that she would acquiesce readily enough. She was an apt pupil: already she had discarded the old fetish of married respectability. Love was enough.

Certainly Virginia went on thinking so for the rest of that golden month of September, whilst, with the echoes of the Peace talk at The Hague not yet died away, events in South Africa and England moved steadily towards war.

Then, at the beginning of October, Stacey and Virginia left their blue lake (less blue now, however, and less enticing o' nights) and came back to England. They took rooms at a Bloomsbury hotel and something seemed to happen almost instantaneously to that bright happiness in which Virginia for three months had sunned herself. It was like being in a room on a sunny morning in which somebody unexpectedly drew down the blind.

She wondered at first if it was because of the war—that long line of defeat which, beginning with the repulse at Nicholson's Nek, whilst they were on their way home, had proceeded to the Modder River disaster and the rout of Buller's forces at Colenso. For Stacey was undoubtedly depressed by them, and that puzzled her a little, because he had taken some pains, back there

in Gravedona, to teach her that the troubles brewing in South Africa in 'ninety-nine were but the fruits of our policy towards the Boers some twenty years earlier. The last few weeks of their stay there were inextricably associated in her mind with names of places and people she had never heard before—Isandula, Rorke's Drift, Cetewayo, Majuba Hill. But for some reason Stacey no longer cared to talk of these things and grew a little annoyed if she did.

"Yes, yes, I know . . . it's all *right* in theory. But England isn't winning—and the thing's quite different . . ."

Virginia was perplexed. Did things alter from wrong to right if one's country were suffering defeat instead of winning victories? If we were wrong and the Boers were right, then surely. . . .

That line of argument took her nowhere, with Stacey, save to the harsh goal of his disapproval and vexation at what he called her unfeminine logicality. War, apparently—or was it patriotism?—was one of those fine things to which the cold rules of logic of whatever gender did not apply. Virginia saw that Stacey, like everybody else, was mad to be in South Africa.

Years afterwards when the memory of this time had faded, like the colours in a sampler, the pain of that moment in which she saw that for Stacey the war was a new excitement, would come back to her. But after that one moment she looked at the fact steadily enough. For this young girl who had defied the conventions at seventeen was not lacking in courage. She stared at the situation squarely whilst Roberts and Kitchener went to new posts in December, whilst she celebrated a birthday (her eighteenth) with Stacey, whilst the Boers were attacking Ladysmith and Buller suffered another reverse at Spion Kop. She wondered sometimes what, by the time this war was over, would have happened to her, and once she wondered whether, if she were going to have a baby, Stacey would still want to go. She thought he would and anyway she wasn't going to have a baby. Stacey did not mean, he said, that she should: the world did not care for illegitimates: and Virginia, strangely, had not minded. Always it had been, with her, just Stacey—as though the idea of a normal married life had never, at any time, with Stacey, taken hold of her. A normal life—the kind that Bridget had lived with her devoted family, that she had expected to live when she married—was a thing she had never known in her own experience, and she had ceased to believe that she ever would

know it. What she grieved for in those early days of nineteen-hundred was her sense of failure. For she saw that Stacey was still restless, still vaguely dissatisfied, and she knew that, after all, she had not sufficed. She did not know that the woman was not born who would have sufficed for Stacey Russell, and it was years before she understood that this was where the truth lay. In those days she merely saw that Stacey was going to the war because she, no more than Sylvia, was strong enough to hold him. Child as she was, however, she seemed to have kept that piece of knowledge to herself. Perhaps she consoled herself with the popular belief that with Kimberley relieved and the surrender of Cronje the war would soon come to an end. Stacey, the poison out of his blood, would come back, and they would leave this hotel life which she so detested, and follow the sun again to the blue lake, sleeping beneath the calm gaze of the mountains she wanted, and Stacey did not, to climb.

One thing there was, all the time, to console her—the knowledge that his book was finished; the first book he had written for years, and that it was to be published in the Spring.

When he would not be there to see it. For she knew, now, that when the Wroxeter Yeomanry sailed at the end of February, Stacey would go with it. Against that contingency she watched him feverishly correcting his proofs: watched him without a word, as if already the chapter was finished, as if she knew words now were useless.

The sight of him in his uniform nearly reduced her to tears; for despite the fact that in it he looked more attractive than ever, his thin face, his nervous, excited gestures (so like those of a schoolboy, she thought) made her feel sad and a little pitiful. The glory of war had passed this child by: all her life it was to do so. As long as she lived Virginia Brodie saw nothing but its futility, its legacy of human misery. Stacey Russell, attractive, ineffectual creature that he was, had here builded better than he knew; he had shown her, in an idle moment, perhaps, but once and for all, that war produced nothing but war, that every war ran out along the channels of human folly and shortsightedness from some other earlier war. Rorke's Drift, Cetewayo, Majuba Hill. . . . These words stood in her mind, like signposts, for ever.

She said good-bye to Stacey one cold wet day, towards the end of February, nineteen-hundred. The memory of his last look

haunted her, for it was a strange mingling of things that were familiar, that belonged to the blue lake, with that other element of relief, of excitement, adventure that she had seen on his face before—that evening when she met him at Victoria Station *en route* for Dover and Italy. Something new—something untried (and a little hazardous, for preference)—she saw, with a pang, that he could never be happy for long without it. For one second of untold bitterness she thought: He's never tried a war . . . he knows more about me than he knows about fighting. . . .

For three months after Stacey's departure she stayed on in her Bloomsbury hotel, very lonely, tragically unemployed (and unemployable) listening to barrel-organs in the London streets playing songs that seemed horrible to her, like *The Absent-Minded Beggar* and *We don't Want to Fight*, buoyed up by the brief letters which came for her and by the tide of good fortune which, with the relief of Ladysmith and Mafeking and the occupation of Johannesburg, she supposed must be bringing Stacey's return daily nearer. Cheered, too, by the appearance of his book, with its simple dedication: "To Virginia, very gratefully" and by the sight of the words "Gravedona, Como, 28th September, 1899" on the final page. It was well reviewed, and these things a little distracted Virginia's attention from the war, which went on through the hot summer of nineteen-hundred until, unable any longer to bear the heat and the long emptiness of her days, she went off to the country, where occasional letters trickled through to her and where, presently, she began to look for something to do, but without success. She tried, then, what it does not seem too often to occur to the unemployable woman to do—she tried to improve her mind. She read widely, perfected her French, and tried by all the means in her power to keep her mind from dwelling upon the quarrel in South Africa which seemed to have swallowed up the greater part of her life.

VI

By August she began to see the necessity of finding some opening for her new-found knowledge, for her funds were beginning to run short. It never occurred to her that Stacey would send her money: why should he? Most likely he hadn't any, either way. He so comfortably assumed in his letters to her that money grew on trees, that all she needed to do was to get up a little earlier each morning and pick what she required. She

presently found a post in Essex with a Mrs. Howard, a young and pretty woman who wanted for the greater part of the day to forget that she had added two small girls to the population of the world. They were charming youngsters and saved Virginia from remembering too often how long ago it was since Stacey had written to her. She had been there only a few weeks, however, before she had a letter which told her that he was in hospital with malaria, but was not coming home, and then nothing else until the note in a strange hand which told her he was dead.

In the days that immediately followed she walked about, performed her duties, talked and ate, as one in a dream. To nobody could she speak of Stacey's death, for everybody here knew her as "Miss Brodie." For the mistress of a young man dead, however gloriously, in South Africa, they would have, she knew, no use as the guardian of their children. She was a little ill without knowing it, and strangely restless, so that the flat outstretched country, so new to her and so lovely that fine hot summer, became presently unbearable. In a mad desire to escape from it and from the stinging ecstasy of beauty remembered, she craved a week's holiday and, though the Howards obviously thought she was a little mad, went off to spend it in London, which lay panting in the heat and which seemed, at night, to lie over her like a shroud. She wished sometimes that that indeed was what it was, for she had lost suddenly, at eighteen, the urge and desire to live, and she saw presently that in London she would never recapture it. She stood more chance of that if she went back to Essex and took charge again of her duties. She waited for the end of her week with some impatience, and wished fretfully that her head would not ache and that the sight of that blue water, topped by bluer sky and ice-crowned mountains, would not so continuously assail her. She had to forget, for nothing was to be done by remembering.

So she went back to Essex, and there she found a letter from Frances Hussey which said:

"I have only just heard that Stacey Russell has died in South Africa. I am, however, very glad to hear that before his death he came to see the error of his ways and that, had he lived, he intended to go back to his wife, who, by the way, has come into quite a fortune, I hear, owing to the death of a relative in the war. Quite providential, this, as I expect most of yours is gone by now. . . ."

At this point Virginia, reading her letter at the nursery tea-table, slipped quietly back in her chair, her eyes closed, and stayed like it so long that the young Howards fled shrieking for assistance. And young Mrs. Howard, coming in hastily in tea-gown and irritation, promptly picked up the letter from the floor and read it before doing anything for the unfortunate Virginia who took a most troublesome time to come out of her dead faint, and was not in the least apologetic when she did. Perhaps, knowing her employer, she was well enough aware that she had read her letter, so that the more usual excuses for making a nuisance of oneself may have seemed a little supererogatory.

But Blanche Howard, furnished with another antidote to the incredible boredom of feminine existence, decided at the end of a week, during which Virginia, steadily refusing to see a doctor, had walked about like a wraith, to send for this Frances Hussey. The girl might be going to be really ill . . . might be going to have a baby. Young women who did this sort of thing did. One couldn't be too careful. So Frances Hussey came, very much the great lady and very condescending to the fluffy little Blanche so obviously anxious to get a connection of hers, Frances Hussey's, out of the house that her family pride was lured into defending even Virginia, who had so seriously injured it. She would, she said, take her niece home at once, and refusing Blanche Howard's tea, she had herself shown up to Virginia's room.

Virginia was in bed, obviously ill and appearing not even surprised to see her aunt, who came and stood by her bedside and said : "Are you going to have a baby?"

"No," said Virginia, as if it didn't matter, either way.

"That woman thinks you are. What's the matter with you, then?"

"Nothing. I'm tired, that's all."

"You're not paid to be tired. Hasn't that woman told you that?"

"Not yet."

"What do you propose to do with yourself?"

"I don't know, Aunt Frank."

"Well, I've told that woman I'll take you away at once. I don't suppose you want to come, and I'm quite sure I don't want to have you. But that woman mustn't know that. We can settle our accounts afterwards. So get up and put your clothes

on and we'll go. I've got a cab outside."

To her surprise Virginia raised no objection. She got wearily out of bed, sat on the edge of it for a moment, pushing her heavy, red-brown hair off her face and sighed deeply. Frances Hussey looked at her—at the white skin of her throat and bosom from which the lace of her nightdress fell away, at the masses of wavy hair, coloured and warm like an October morning—and hated her. Phil's child—and Don's—and no better than she should be. These Hussey women were hussies. The old joke ran through her mind as she looked at Virginia. There she sat, in that ridiculous nightdress, not caring . . . as if she were still a respectable woman, as if what she had done didn't matter, as though it were a thing you could wipe out.

"Better hurry up," she said, and walked away to the window, where she stood gazing out upon Blanche Howard's roses until Virginia's dressing was complete. She thought she hated Virginia because she had done this unbelievable thing, forgetting that she always had hated her, and not knowing that there was now a new quality in her hating. She hated her because of her knowledge . . . because, already, at eighteen, she knew things Frances Hussey was aware now that she would never know.

CHAPTER THREE

I

AT Cedars Lodge nothing had changed save that Frances Hussey had a new housekeeper named Martha Gray, engaged, as Virginia thought, to prevent gossip in the kitchen. But Martha was kind, her manner perfect, and Virginia got well with a quickness for which she, in part at least, was responsible. There was, however, an event which completed her cure, which made her feel that all was not over, that roused the fighting Hussey spirit in her. She had been home for just upon three weeks, when a woman who considered herself of some importance in the village came to tea, but not, apparently, to meet Virginia Brodie. She made that quite sufficiently obvious, talking all the time of parochial matters, of the war, the General Election and the chances of a Unionist majority, carefully excluding Virginia from the conversation and as successfully managing to escape seeing her when she made her adieux. And when she had gone Frances Hussey said: "I'm sorry. I hope you don't blame me. It's quite inevitable, I'm afraid. You can't expect people to approve."

"I don't," said Virginia, "but I'm polite to many people of whom I don't approve."

Francis Hussey smiled. "Really, my dear Virginia . . ."

"You think I'm not in a position to disapprove of anyone because I've lived with a man I wasn't married to, I suppose? I don't know why that should strike me as funny, but it does."

"I don't think you'll find it at all funny if you live to be a little older. I should advise you to face the truth at once. That woman's a sign and symbol. She stands for public opinion. You can't do what you have done and expect to pick up life just where you put it down."

"I don't expect to do that." (And she *hadn't*, ever, put life down.) "But I don't see how other people have been harmed by what I did."

"What about the deserted wife?"

"Oh, does the woman who's just gone out stand for outraged wifeness? Well, Sylvia Russell wasn't deserted. She and

Stacey hadn't lived together for two years when we met. She didn't mind—much."

"That's what *he* told you, I suppose. All the same, he was going back to her."

"I have only your word for that."

Her voice trembled a little, for something told her it was true; that Stacey, had he lived, did intend to go back to his wife. She had never had the courage to find out for certain, but she must. There were ways of doing it. She might write to Sylvia . . . to Ethel Eliot—no, not to Ethel. Ethel might lie, and somehow she did not believe that Sylvia would. But that, too, was only an instinct. She had never met Sylvia Russell, never written to her; she knew only what Stacey had been used to say of her, and her instinct to trust her now was probably wrong. But she meant to put it to the test because it was suddenly imperative that she should find out for certain whether this thing was true or not. She thought: If she hates me she'll probably say it's true, anyway. . . .

Aunt Frank was saying: "You may as well face the facts, Virginia. You've done for yourself. Socially and otherwise. People won't forget—and they won't forgive. And you've spoiled your chances of getting married, if that's what you wanted. Nobody will marry you now. You may as well face that fact, too."

Virginia stared at her.

"My dear aunt, this is the beginning of the twentieth century," she said, and laughed. But underneath she was a little frightened. Of what? More than all else, perhaps, of being frightened.

That night she wrote to Sylvia Russell on that one point, without excusing herself or assuming that the woman to whom she wrote was her enemy. It was, in many ways, an extraordinary letter for a girl of her age to have written. Was it true that Stacey had meant, when he came home, to return to her? Might she, please, have a straight plain answer?

Plain and straight indeed came Sylvia's answer a few days later. Virginia had imagined nothing like it, had hoped for nothing even half as kind. She had not known that the world held women who could think and write like this. She had expected at the best cold politeness or truth most brutally set down, or reproaches; at the worst abuse. And Sylvia wrote from out a

heart overflowing with kindness, with a sympathy and understanding that was like balm to Virginia's troubled youthful pride. It was not that Sylvia Russell denied the truth or tried to alter the look of it, but only that she seemed to understand how the thing had come about, why she and Stacey had done the thing they had done and where it mattered and where it did not.

Her letter told Virginia all she wanted to know and quite definitely it comforted her. It set down the cold fact that Stacey had indeed meant to return to her, that he had done it before, and that this explained why she had given him a year to reconsider his plea for divorce; that he had not it in him to be faithful to anybody for long but that he always meant to be, that he never consciously deceived. And Sylvia seemed to understand how it came about that Stacey should have seemed to her so wonderful, so very much worth all the risks she had run—and, too, that she had not grasped very well then what they were. "You were much too young to stand the siege Stacey put up, for he was a very charming person, and I do not doubt that he was very much in love with you. Neither do I doubt that he made you very happy while it lasted. Stacey was no one's for keeps. I stopped loving him long ago, but I never stopped seeing what a charming, lovable person he was. But I understood him a little better, I think, than he understood himself, and that, I fancy, annoyed him a little." She had learnt, she said, to accept him as he was, and not to blame him for it, and she had tried steadily to build up a life of her own that he couldn't touch, in which he had no part. And, at the end she wrote: "I hope you will be happy again some day and meet a man who will give you all the happiness Stacey gave you for a while, but with that added sense of stability and permanence he could never, alas, give anyone. But don't imagine there's nothing to come to you from life if you don't. Life is more than its personal relationships. Stacey and Como were only a little bit of it, just something you had to go through, part of your natural human experience. Above all, don't let anybody make you think yourself a sinner. They will quickly enough if you let them." And, as a postscript: "I'm glad, anyway, about the book. It's the best thing Stacey ever did—and it's yours. Come and see me some day, and if you want any help, if you think I can be of any use to you at all, please don't hesitate to let me know."

II

It was not until much later that Virginia went to see her, but she treasured the letter and followed its advice. She found a job. It took her in the New Year away from the border country of dark pines and heather to an agricultural county where neat, prosperous farms and well-tilled fields stood against the sky. From her bedroom window she could see the blue-black head of Solbury Hill, the dark wood, climbing the side of the deep valley to Imberford, and line after line of shining fields quiet beneath sun or moon.

Her job she recognized for a dull one. She had constituted herself companion and reader to an old woman with a great love of books and failing eyesight, the atmosphere of whose home was somehow only a more amiable edition of that she had so long shared with her aunt. Old Mrs. Saxton gave Virginia the idea that most of her had ceased to exist the day her son, Arthur Saxton, went to the war, which here, at the beginning of nineteen-one, still dragged on. Her grandson, young Richard Saxton, was still at Oxford. The old lady talked to Virginia about both of them. She adored them, but she appeared scarcely to be aware of the existence of her daughter-in-law, a tall, palely-coloured, vague creature who seemed not to have sufficient existence to have produced a son, so that the wonderful much-talked-of Richard became to Virginia something of a myth. She felt a little depressed by the atmosphere that pervaded the house. She had lived so long with women whose lives had been twisted awry because their men had died, or because there had been no men, that she had half supposed she was entitled to something now that should present a better balance to the world. She did not find it at Huish Priors. Here again were two women marking time—until their men came home!

It surprised her to find how little she belonged to them or shared their habit of mind. She had believed herself tremendously in love with Stacey Russell: she had ordered her life for a space on the assumption that love would last for ever—that it was enough, that it filled a life. But it hadn't lasted for ever; it had filled not even one year of life: she did not like to think of the brevity of that *grande passion*. Surely it had begun to die in that very moment when she had seen that she, for Stacey, was a competitor with the war for his interest? Stacey had been dead

nearly eight months. And nothing of him lived at all. All that she had known of him lay in a few feet of South African soil, and, in a sense, some little piece of herself lay there with him, as dead as he—all that part of herself which had rushed on Romance, as on a spear, sharp entry into some better and happier world. She had a tremendous sense of futility, of waste, as if in her ignorance she had deliberately cut out some part of her life and thrown it away. She did not look back upon those days and nights of love because there, in the place in which she might have expected to find them harboured warmly against Time, they were not. Nothing was there but a blank, a sane and rounded emptiness which had no quality of pain or unhappiness whatsoever.

She had tried not to whine nor to repine. She had tackled her aunt and wrested from her a promise not to queer her pitch at Huish Priors. "After all, if you do, what do you gain?" she said. "I'll have to stay here if I can't get a job—and you'll hate that. You want to get rid of me. Here's your chance."

Frances Hussey talked about her conscience, her duty and her responsibility; but her need to get rid of her niece was greater than any of them. So Virginia went to Huish Priors and read Barrie, Conrad, Hardy, May Sinclair, Somerset Maugham, "Elizabeth," Violet Hunt, Zangwill and many another to the old woman who ruled there. It was not an exciting life, but at least it was beautifully set. The year strode on, growing in colour and beauty. Its pageantry touched Virginia's young heart, confirming her belief that life lay in front of her, not behind, that it was somehow good and worth while, and she thought she knew what Wordsworth had meant when he said:

*One impulse from a vernal wood
Can teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good
Than all the sages can.*

She lived quietly, happily, day by day, immutably in the Present, without memory, regret or anticipation. She did not feel that life was passing by her, nor was she swept by any wild desire to rush out and bid it stand and deliver. It was enough to be living her own life, to have escaped from the gin fate had set for her feet. The dark, gloomy London house with its shadow of the past lying like a black cloud upon it had faded from her mind,

and the bare austerities of Cedars Lodge. Life at Huish Priors was a thing more gracious in outline, more rounded to a whole, than any she had so far encountered. It soothed and calmed, and whether it satisfied or not was just then an unimportant point. She felt at peace in this old house which shared its name with the village that ran up steeply out of Imberford, though it boasted no name upon its gates. Was it the village which gave the house its name, or the house the village? Nobody knew. There had been no village that anybody could remember before the house—only a stray cottage or two and an old inn which had persisted, been rebuilt and flourished now as the Prior Arms. Huish Priors itself must at some time or other have been somebody's "folly," and the builder must have had his mind more upon a church than upon a dwelling-house. It was of stone, the front fretted and multi-figured, the faces beaten flat and smooth by the winds that swept up from the valley and from the high grounds surrounding it. It had come into the Saxtons' hands in the early part of the eighteenth century and had been added to, improved and modernized by a succession of Saxtons building for young wives and for posterity; but nobody had tampered with that lofty, ecclesiastical face. Nobody, Virginia felt, would have dared. No Saxton, certainly, if the air that permeated the house in their absence was in any way typical of the family attitude to their home.

She wondered sometimes about these absent men; but a line of indifference crossed her curiosity, so that her thoughts of them came and went in her mind as a definite pattern of light and dark. Though she had imbibed the doctrine that women's lives depended upon men, she had known very few. She did not remember her father. There had been her Uncle Jack—a mere memory of a young and pleasing face and figure who had been there occasionally, and then, suddenly, no more at all. And there had been the brothers and young men friends of Bridget Lane. Nobody after that but Stacey Russell—and the young men who had taught her the Boston Waltz at Ethel's parties. All that belonged to some other life. In this one there were no men at all, save the vicar, the doctor, an elderly brother of old Mrs. Saxton's and a stray relative or two not sufficiently male, as Virginia put it to herself, to be noticeable. These two women were a more amiable repetition of her human companionship in Neville Gardens, and Virginia sighed a little even here, in her

little oasis of contentment. Without being aware of it, she wanted the kind of life that other people lived. The day was not yet, but it was coming, when it would dawn upon her that that passionate resolve of hers not to be robbed of life had not been carried through. An hour of Spring—false Spring, that did not move forward to the wealth and pageantry of Summer—she had had that. Was that all there was to be of life—for her? Why, it was as if a rose put forth buds against the winds of March.

She did not ask herself these things yet. She had not begun to ask herself them even in the summer, when Richard Saxton, “down” from Oxford and done, for the moment at least, with travels and visits, came home for good.

III

He was twenty-two and he came home regretfully, expecting to be bored and to have his determination to follow his father to South Africa steadfastly resisted—first by his mother’s tears and secondly by his grandmother’s strength of will. But he looked once at Virginia and straightway forgot South Africa.

And Virginia looked at him. She saw only that he was young, slim and dark, and looked as if he could run a long way. Her youth and vitality saluted his. Across the dinner-table, young Richard smiled at her and Virginia smiled back, that lovely smile of hers that came up slowly but was, in the finish, a vivid, arresting thing. Richard thought he had never seen anybody so tremendously alive; but Virginia felt that until that moment of smiling salutation she had not really been alive at all, that even as she smiled at him her heart had quickened in her body.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

RICHARD said: "It *is* a nice county, isn't it? How much have you seen of this corner of it?"

It was the second day of his home-coming, and he sat upon the old south wall against which the fig-tree grew, upon which he had been used to climb as a small boy. Virginia, who had come into the garden to gather roses and stayed to talk to Richard, thought that even to see somebody sitting on a wall made the world seem younger. This young man had only been home two days—but already Huish Priors was a different place—its occupants fresh people. The old lady wanted less attention—and less reading, thank heaven, for Virginia hated reading aloud and the sitting-still it entailed: and young Mrs. Saxton, Richard's mother, had some colour in her cheeks, a prettier way with her hair and a personality, of sorts, it seemed, after all. No lives of their own. . . . It was certainly true of these Saxton women! Richard's coming—and, more, Richard's evident intention to remain—had released some spring in them so that they, too, sat up and looked out at life with some show of interest. There should be a dinner-party—people should come to tea, to dance, to play tennis. . . .

Virginia, thinking these things, yet answered Richard quite sensibly.

"Oh, I've been down through the woods to Imberford, down again to Clutton and Clunbury and once to a place called Eye. I liked that. I had tea at a lovely old inn there."

"The Tudor. Jolly old place. Did you run up against old Jeremy Bentley?"

"No . . . who is Jeremy Bentley?"

"Oh, rather a character in these parts, very striking to look at. He's a gentleman farmer and caused a huge sensation here years ago by ploughing his fields by steam."

"Oh," said Virginia, who did not know, nor very much care to know, anything about agriculture.

"Doesn't steam ploughing interest you?"

Virginia laughed, as if it were answer enough.

"What *does* interest you, Virginia?"

"Hearing you call me Virginia."

"Why?"

"Because you oughtn't to, I suppose."

"Rubbish! . . . Virginia, can't we go walking together some day soon? There are lots of places I can show you. We could walk across to Solbury Hill one day and have lunch somewhere."

"You seem to forget I'm paid to read to Mrs. Saxton, not to go walking with her grandson."

"Why shouldn't you do both? I'm sure you're a better walker than you are reader. Even in that absurd skirt."

"It isn't absurd."

"Of course it is. I wonder women stand it. Such a silly conspiracy this one that pretends women haven't any legs."

"Oh, my skirts aren't as long as all that. And I go walking in quite a short one."

"Do you! Do you really . . .?" He smiled. "How do you get on with the old lady, my revered grandmother?"

"Very well, don't I?"

"I did think you did, rather. But what on earth made you come? It isn't your job at all—and I'm sure you must hate reading aloud."

"I do, but I can't do much else beside read, write people's letters and talk French a little. And I wanted a job."

"Modern feminine craze for independence, eh? Why didn't you get *trained* for something?"

"Because I never had a chance. I mean, nobody ever thought of it—not even I. At least, not in time."

"Good Lord! Do you expect to begin in your cradle? You're a perfect kid—there's oceans of time *now*, if you really want to."

Again he smiled at her. "Don't believe you do, really."

"I do, though—but it's too late. I haven't any money left. I never had much, and I spent it on something else."

The sudden wistful expression on her face seemed to amuse Richard.

"Blue'd it in, I suppose . . . fast life and all that. . . . Naughty Virginia!"

Virginia was very quiet suddenly, arranging and rearranging her roses in her basket and looking at them, not at Richard, who said presently:

"Like this place, Virginia?"

"This house? Very much . . . oh, very much. The garden

and the stone terrace in front and the yew trees make me think of a house I once saw in Italy. Only that was much bigger, of course. It seems to be only the people who can afford to live in palaces who have gardens in Italy."

"Oh, an Italian villa, was it? Which one?"

"The Villa Carlotta."

"Why, she's been to Como. Lucky Virginia! You've beaten me. You must have gone in your cradle."

"I was seventeen."

"How old are you now, Virginia?"

"I shall be twenty in November."

"Nineteen! And she reads *Tess* and the naughty Mrs. Egerton to my grandmother. It's positively indecent!"

The colour came up into Virginia's face, delighting him.

"Have you read *Tess* to her, Virginia?"

"No—she wouldn't let me. I've read *Sentimental Tommy* and *Tommy and Grizel* and *The Little Minister* and *Almayer's Folly* by a Mr. Conrad, a new writer, and *Audrey Craven* by May Sinclair, another new writer, I think. . . . And now I must go in."

Richard jumped off the wall and walked along at her side.

"Virginia, what about that walk?"

"Some day, perhaps . . . if I stay here."

"Of course you'll stay here. Why shouldn't you?"

She did not answer.

"Don't you like it here . . . now I've come? Be truthful, Virginia."

"I liked it before."

"Oh, *too* truthful Virginia!"

She smiled at him and was gone and developed a headache and did not appear at lunch.

II

It was lovely there at Huish Priors with Richard. Nothing could stop its being that. The summer was behaving unusually well and the country was enticing. They were both young: they loved walking and the open air. And they loved being together.

Strangely enough, nobody hindered them overmuch; though nobody knew, perhaps, how often they went out together. And Virginia, well-born and connected as she was known to be (merely bitten by this modern microbe of independence), was a favourite with the old lady, who, just then, would have looked

favourably upon anybody who could keep her beloved Richard at home. To have a son at the war was sufficient—this horrible war which still dragged along and looked as though it might go on for ever. Of course if one had an Empire one had to fight to keep it: that was understood. All the same, there had been a good many wars in her day, old Mrs. Saxton thought,—minor affairs in India, Egypt and in Afghanistan; the Crimean War (soon after her marriage, that was), the Indian Mutiny and a lot of trouble in China. . . . There had been wars enough. She wanted her son home and her grandson to remain there, and she smiled upon Virginia because she was young enough and attractive enough to keep him there, for the moment.

III

It was after their walk over to Clutton that something in Virginia took fright. They had met, as they came into the village, a handsome old man whom Richard had saluted, and Virginia, taken by his tall, upright figure and flashing eye, had inquired his name. That, she was told, was Jeremy Bentley—the Jeremy Sacheverell Bentley, about whom he'd once talked to her, the man who'd ploughed his fields, to Virginia's intense disinterest, by machinery before anybody else had as much as seen a steam plough.

"He boasts that he was the third man in England to use Smith's Cultivator," Richard told her now.

Virginia laughed, as she had laughed before at this learned agricultural talk. She had never heard of Smith's Cultivator, but she saw, for herself, that many of the surrounding farmers still tilled and sowed by horse plough and by hand.

"Yes," said Richard, "the steam plough didn't do everything that was expected of it, I believe . . . I'm afraid I'm not very well up in it. The old lady can tell you . . . she used to know the old man and his wife years ago, before I was born or thought of."

But since a world with Richard in it was so much more delightful than a world which knew him not, Virginia pushed old Jeremy Bentley back into his proper part of it and talked about something else.

But at dinner-time that evening he emerged again. It was Richard's fault, for he it was who told his grandmother that they had seen him that afternoon, "looking as young as ever."

"He's well over seventy," said the old lady. "He *must* be. Seventy-four or five, at least. He came here to farm the year I was married . . . eighteen-fifty-one that was. . . . He was a very young man then—very handsome, too, with a moustache I remember, and no whiskers, which was unusual, then. I remember, too, how he thrilled all the local feminine hearts. I, of course, was a bit of a girl then—not any older than you, my dear, though I *was* married."

Virginia smiled at her, and Richard said:

"He intends to live to be a hundred."

"He will, if he sets his heart upon it. He always got his own way. A terrible old bully I used to think him, but he married a very pretty little wife."

"Did he bully her, too?" Virginia inquired.

"Well, my dear,—*we* used to think so. She was a lot younger than he was and she really was exquisitely pretty when I first knew her. Lovely regular features and enormous eyes in a tiny face. And a beautiful skin. She had lots of children—nearly all girls, too—and she faded early."

"Did you see very much of them?" Virginia inquired politely.

"Not after his eldest daughter was killed in the hunting-field. He shut himself up after that, I fancy. Poor man, he wasn't very lucky in his children."

"What happened to them?" Virginia asked.

"Well, the only boy was killed in some war or other . . . and there was the girl who was killed hunting. And there was one who ran away with a neighbouring farmer. A married man. Beth I think her name was. A terrible scandal. Old Bentley was furious and turned the man out of the farm . . . he rented it from him. They went out of the neighbourhood. There were people, I remember, who sympathized with them."

The old lady shook her head. Virginia was silent.

"Rather wonderful, for that time, wasn't it?" said Richard.

"Oh, my dearest boy, there are always sentimental, romantically-inclined people who like to think themselves broad-minded. . . ."

"But wasn't there some story about the man having an insane wife?" It was Richard's mother who spoke. "I'm sure Arthur told me something of the sort."

"Yes, I believe he had, and it's true, too, of course, that the old man had prevented the girl from getting married when she had

the chance. But it was, I believe, a very *unsuitable* alliance. Besides, he vetoed her sisters' marriages, too. . . . They might have done the same and made the same excuse."

"Oh, yes—the old maids of Clunbury Hall!" said Richard's mother. "I remember the phrase now. There were two other girls, too."

"Was it two? I forget. One wanted to become a doctor, but consoled herself eventually by marrying a dentist. That was Eve, I think. And the other one's still at home, for all I know to the contrary. I don't know, though—it's years since I had anything to do with them."

"Was it . . . was it because of the daughter who ran away . . . that you stopped seeing them?"

It was Virginia who spoke. Her voice sounded thin and sharp in her own ears. She expected them to look at her in surprise, but they did not.

"Dear me, no," said the old lady calmly. "It was years before then that people stopped asking the Bentleys anywhere. The old man shut himself up, became quite a recluse after that hunting-field tragedy. One just forgot about him."

"Was she happy, do you know?"

"The girl who ran away? Presumably. I never heard."

"She had some children, I believe," said Richard's mother.

"I confess I feel a lot of sympathy for her."

"Do you? Why?" asked the old lady, though less contemptuously than she usually spoke to her daughter-in-law—almost as though she were interested, for once, in her opinion.

But Dorothy Saxton's courage had petered out. She did not defend her sneaking sympathy with the erring Miss Bentley, and Virginia suspected that she nourished it only as a fellow-feeling, that she could not but feel sorry for somebody whom everybody else dismissed as non-existent. She murmured something about her unhappy life at home, and the old lady laughed.

"Don't be sentimental, Dolly. If women do things of this kind they know what they're up against. After all, we can't have every young woman who's unhappy at home thinking she can run off with the first man, married or not, who gives her the chance. Besides, the Bentleys are of good family—she should have known better. Breeding ought to tell."

The conversation ran by Virginia after that. She sat very still, feeling a little sick and wishing that Richard were not there—

wishing that he had never come, that *she* had never come.

But when she looked at him and he smiled at her, her heart seemed to stop beating.

They went presently into the long room that was open to the early summer night in which, like a lantern at a masquerade, the moon hung in a sky that was dark and blue and strewn with silver. Those were the days when neither gramophone nor wireless had arrived to banish the amateur singer, and when coffee was drunk Richard's mother went to the piano and sang. She had a pretty voice but no taste, and Virginia, whom Stacey Russell had taught to care for words as well as music, never enjoyed her singing. To-night, however, she chose a couple of songs from *The Geisha*, and Virginia unexpectedly remembered that delirious evening, years ago, when she had gone with Bridget and her friends to see that play, and wondered why she should feel so suddenly unhappy. When, the singing done, Richard suggested that they should go to look at the moon, it was somehow a relief to be able to say that she had promised to play patience with his grandmother. The thought of Bridget, with a home of her own, a husband and probably a baby now, stood for something that made her heart ache whenever she thought of it. So, looking sulky, Richard went out and looked at the moon by himself, which apparently made it seem not so good, for he came back very soon and hung about until the game was finished and the old lady was slipping the cards back into their case.

"You've wasted a perfectly lovely half-hour," he said to Virginia, "playing that silly game. It's a simply marvellous moon. . . ."

"Take her out now to look at it for five minutes, but run and find her a wrap first," said the old lady, who did not care to see that look of moody discontent upon Richard's face. "And don't you think we might have some tennis one afternoon soon? It would be nice, wouldn't it, to ask the Wharton girls? You used to play a very good game with Mavis."

Richard, half-way out of the door, said eagerly: "Do you play, Miss Brodie?" and "Hoorah!" when she said: "A little . . . I'm not very good," and smiled that slow, utterly ravishing smile of hers as he went out after the wrap.

He was very quick about it. Coming back he threw it over her shoulders and hurried her outside as if he had five minutes left to live. They walked down the stone terrace, across the lawn

and out, without a word, into the fairy world beyond. When the house was well behind them they stopped as by common consent, and stood quite still looking not at the night or the lovely moon, but at each other. Their hearts pounded: their faces looked strangely white in the moonlight. Without a word they found themselves suddenly in each other's arms.

It was Richard who said: "You're not kissing me at all, Virginia. You're letting me kiss you. . . . That's not all I want."

Virginia said nothing: paler than ever her face looked in the moonlight. White and gold, she was, like one of the tall lilies in the garden behind them, Richard thought, and with something strange about her—something he had never seen before—remote—sacrificial. A queer word, that, to come into his mind.

"Don't you *want* to kiss me?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Virginia, "most terribly."

"Mean it?"

"Yes."

"Then do it. . . ."

He pulled her up to him and did not grumble any more. But presently, as they walked on together through the garden, he said:

"Virginia, have you ever kissed a man before?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Have you ever *wanted* to . . . like that?"

She said, almost without hesitation at all: "No . . . nobody." For suddenly she knew that she never had wanted to kiss Stacey Russell. She had wanted him to kiss her. That piece of knowledge stalked amazingly into her mind with the effect of a torch held high above thick gloom. It altered the whole look of that relationship, chased from her mind, in some unexpected fashion, the shadows left there by the conversation at dinner. She could have explained that dead and gone relationship to God.

She may even have thought as she put her hand on Richard's arm and pressed closely against it, that she could have explained it to Richard.

IV

Somewhere in the deep watches of the night she was most terribly aware that she could not. It never could be explained to anybody, because to nobody could she transfer that immense

clarity of vision which made her, for the first time in her life, understand by what she was attracted, by what driven, two years ago when the figure of Stacey Russell had seemed to fill the world. Romance after the dull ugly existence of Neville Gardens, life after the slow but steady attempt of others to crush out her natural zest for it: sharp, keen gratitude for somebody's appreciation and admiration, for the knowledge that at last she was wanted, that she had, after all, a place of her own in the world. What was there she would *not* have given up for the wonderful being who offered her these things, this heady piece of knowledge?

But what would any of these people understand of that? "After all, we can't have every young woman who imagines herself unhappy at home . . ." The amused, scornful tone of old Mrs. Saxton's voice rang in her ears. "She was of good family—she should have known better. Breeding should tell. . . ."

No, there wasn't anything to do about it. That same clarity of vision which made so clear to her that precipitate action of two years ago made clear to her also the outlook of other people—all this Saxton clan which believed that women existed for men, that all the excuses were for men, that the Saxton women, and women who would enter the Saxton ranks, did not do things that ever so slightly stood in need of excuse.

There was only one thing she could do. She could go away. There were other jobs, and she had only just begun to fall in love with Richard and he with her. She could stop it if she liked—would escape while there was still time. She thought these things calmly, but all the time her heart seemed on the verge of snapping asunder like a thing grown suddenly brittle. She would die rather than tell Richard, and already she loved him too much not to tell him.

This resolution filled her brain, steadily pushing sleep out of it. She looked in the morning as though all the life and vitality had been wrung out of her during the night. She breakfasted so early she did not see Richard, and she spent much time afterwards avoiding him, though old Mrs. Saxton was keeping her bed and did not require her services. Run to earth at last, she refused his suggestion of tennis or a walk. She had a headache, she said, which was true enough.

"Darling, how *dare* you have a headache to-day?"

"Why not to-day?"

"Well . . . it's our day, rather, isn't it? Or have you forgotten last night?"

She shook her head. Forget something which had kept her awake all night?

"You're not going to tell me you didn't mean it?"

She shook her head again.

"Or that you repent? Virginia, you *did* mean it—you *do* love me?"

"Terribly," she said, looking very gravely at him.

"Why 'terribly'? Love isn't like that."

"Isn't it?"

"Not at our age. Virginia, do look a little *happy* about it. You *are* happy about it, aren't you?"

Virginia wanted suddenly to cry. She stood silent, biting back her tears.

"Oh, *darling*," Richard said, "that headache must be bad, and I'm keeping you out here in the hot sun. Go and sit down there under the trees and I'll bring you some more cushions and something for the head. What a brute I am!"

She took his headache tablets, allowed herself to be made comfortable among the pile of cushions from which he disentangled himself and watched him settle himself opposite her. "You shut your eyes and go to sleep," he said. "I won't talk."

Virginia obeyed, and as the pain in her head decreased a measure of confidence stole back to her. Once again the situation might be explained, might be forgotten. *Don't let anybody make you feel yourself a sinner . . . they will if you let them. . . . You're young, and have all your life before you.* Sylvia Russell's phrases tumbled untidily into her mind, with tonic effect. That was the sane, the only policy. Why should she not be happy? Why, because she loved Richard, should she suddenly feel guilty when she had not felt so before—and she hadn't, not once; not even beneath her aunt's cold and contemptuous glances. Why should she tell Richard anything about it? How did it hurt him—this thing which had happened before she was aware of his existence? Where was the disloyalty to him? Besides, was it not possible that Richard, too . . . a young man, with money and a position, at Oxford, in Paris, Berlin . . . There were things Stacey used to hint at . . . more than hint at . . . for she had been tempting material, with her innocent,

untarnished mind. (Oh, but merely to look at Richard's face rebuked her.) But if there were . . . if he had . . . would Richard tell her? Young men, according to Stacey, thought nothing of these exploits. And nothing, she had gathered, of the young women who shared them. Light women who dallied on the primrose path, without whom all men would be virtuous.

Light women. On her pallid face her dark lashes fluttered a moment and were still. Richard, watching her, saw the trembling of her young and very tender mouth and wanted passionately to kiss it. Virginia, so terribly conscious of his regard, thought that he must hear her heart beat, must see the pulse that throbbed high up in her throat, and so fast it nearly choked her.

A light woman. . . . They'd think her that. Would *Richard* think her that? Would he believe that she had been won by the first uplifted finger, that dignity, self-respect were with her no more than leaves flying before the wind? He would never understand that the thing had seemed a holy mission, a consecration, a sign from heaven. . . . ("Oh, the thing was *serious*, then . . . all for love and the world well lost? And it began, ran its course and was finished with, less than two short years ago! And now you fancy yourself in love with me!") Wasn't that how he'd talk—how the thing would look to him? Did the man live who wouldn't see it so? Why, if she didn't know, if this bright beam of knowledge did not so steadfastly illumine her own mind, so clearly establish the truth in it, it would look that way to *her*. But she could never explain: the thing was too difficult for that. She could never even make it *sound* feasible. . . . There never could be any explanations: either Richard must never be told or she must go away and never see him again. With an effort, she opened her eyes and saw that he was looking at her in a way that made her heart leap in her body for joy. Oh no, she could not bear it if she never saw him again. He was her other self. She wanted him in a way she had never wanted Stacey Russell. That Stacey should want *her* had been sufficient.

Stay . . . stay and say nothing. Why not? That's the sensible, unhysterical thing to do. He won't know—and who will tell him? And how will he be worse off? You'll make him unhappy by telling him. Even if you don't lose him it'll never be the same. It'll be spoiled for ever. . . .

The merest ghost of her lovely smile slipped over the whiteness of her face as their eyes met.

"Is the book interesting? Read some of it to me. . . . My head's much better."

"Would you like me to? It ought to interest you. It's about Como. A girl goes off there with a man who's been told he's only got a year to live."

Virginia's heart had quite stopped. She said quietly: "I've read it, I think . . . *Last Summer*, it's called, isn't it? . . . by Eustace Russell. . . ." She wondered if he had noticed the dedication: *To Virginia. Very gratefully.* He hadn't, apparently. He said:

"Yes. Did you like it?"

"I did, rather. Do you?"

"So far, yes. . . . Sorry for the girl, though—she was a decent sort."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes . . . didn't you? Plucky thing to do, going off like that with a man who couldn't marry her, just because she knew she could make him happy and not bothering about the music she'd have to face alone when he was dead."

"Would there . . . in these enlightened days . . . be much music to face?"

"Oh, well . . . you know what the world is. A girl can't ever, I should say, *quite* get over a thing like that."

"But she mightn't see that there was very much to get over . . . I mean if she had enough character and strength of mind to go off in the first place, wouldn't you say she'd have enough to face any sort of music afterwards?"

"Probably—but she'd have a thin time of it. You heard everybody at dinner the other evening. . . . People are queer about this kind of thing, and facing the music's a dull pastime, I should say—the tune's apt to be so confoundedly monotonous. All the same, if you'd loved somebody as much as all that . . ."

Richard's young face was alight with the yearning for the love of which the very young and the very romantic dream. Virginia could hardly bear to look at it. She said: "But if she'd found out she *didn't* love him . . . that she'd made a mistake? . . ."

"Oh, that would be hell," said Richard. "She'd feel as though she'd sacrificed herself for nothing. . . ."

"Wouldn't having been kind—helpful . . . of use . . . be any good? I mean if the man never knew . . ."

"Perhaps, but I can't help thinking she'd feel pretty sick about it."

"Guilty, you mean?"

The word scurried, like a lightning flash across her mind. Richard looked a little startled.

"I don't know . . . perhaps. She would, wouldn't she, if she ever met somebody else?"

"Yes," said Virginia, "I suppose she would."

"Besides, after a mistake of that kind you'd never be sure, would you? I mean . . . how could you ever be sure you weren't making the same kind of mistake again?"

"But suppose she didn't know the truth about the first man until she'd met the second? . . . Suppose it was only the real that showed up the counterfeit?"

"I don't know," said Richard. "I'd not be too happy if I'd so thoroughly mistaken the counterfeit for the real, first go off. . . ."

Out of her love and pity Virginia sat silent. And suddenly Richard laughed.

"How beastly serious we've become," he cried. "Why, we've actually made the thing personal. How ridiculous! Is the head worse, darling? I'm sure the argument's been bad for it."

"No, honestly. The pain's almost gone. May I be lazy for another ten minutes? Then we might have a walk through the woods."

"Oh, good!" said Richard, and then, "Oh, damn!"

Towards them across the grass came walking a tall girl in white, who waved a tennis racket at Richard and looked with interest as she came nearer at Virginia lying there among her cushions.

"Hallo, Dickie! Your grandmother said there'd be some tennis if I came over. Feel like a game?"

Virginia sat up abruptly from her cushions. The girl in white stared at her, and then at Richard inquiringly.

"Oh, sorry," Richard said, "haven't you met? Miss Brodie, Miss Wharton."

Oh, the companion-person, said Miss Wharton's brief glance and the stiff little smile with which she acknowledged what she obviously considered a very unnecessary introduction.

"The fact is, Miss Brodie and I were going to play, but she had a headache—and we'd made up our minds to go a walk instead."

"Oh, I see," said Miss Wharton. "My mistake, evidently. I suppose Mrs. Saxton got mixed."

"No . . . it's my fault. She did suggest I should fix up some tennis, but I'm afraid I clean forgot. . . . I'll give you a game with pleasure. Miss Brodie's headache wants another ten minutes, I know."

"Right you are," said Miss Wharton, and moved away in the direction of the court.

"I'm most awfully sorry, darling," Richard whispered. "Confound the girl. Simply forgot all about her. You don't mind?"

"Not a bit. Don't let her beat you."

He gave her a look that twisted her heart as he went off. Virginia watched him run into the house and run out again, shoes changed, racket in hand, waved her hand and smiled.

And hardened her heart.

So *that* was Mavis Wharton—the girl she knew they all wanted Richard to marry. What could they see in her? She was healthy and well-bred. And they knew all about her. *All?* Well, *enough*. They knew her family and her personal history. She had been well brought up. There were no sentimental skeletons in her cupboard: no unexplained gaps in her life. If anyone said to her: "And where were you from the night of June the eighth, eighteen-ninety-nine, to the middle of September, nineteen-hundred?" she'd have no sort of difficulty in giving a satisfactory answer. She was well dressed, healthy and fond of sport. She played tennis and rode to hounds. She would have several healthy children and not make a fuss about it, and she'd do the honours at Huish Priors as every other female Saxton had done them through the centuries.

They knew all this about her, but what they didn't know was that she would swallow Richard up, that she'd make him unhappy because she'd give him none of the things his romantic nature wanted. He was an idealist about love—and they were offering him a mere marriage. Mavis Wharton would never love anybody as Richard—and she—understood it. She was of that great army who get through life quite comfortably without it, a member of Stevenson's company of "anæmic, tailorish persons to imagine whom in a love-affair is absurd." The memory of the day when Stacey had read that essay to her pricked at her heart. They had climbed up from the lakeside, and it was very hot, and there at the top, whilst she cooled her face in the

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grass, Stacey had fished out *Virginibus*. And here, now, in this moment so full of things that mattered so much more, she acknowledged the fact that it was Stacey who had given her a taste for literature as for so many other things. She knew that she would never, all her life, be able to forget these things she owed him—or him because of them. As long as she lived she would be grateful to him for so much—even for this sharp certainty which showed her where she had stood with him and where she stood now with Richard.

The sound of the tennis balls striking upon the rackets came to her, and of Mavis Wharton's voice, very clear, cold and decisive, on the warm summer air. She couldn't hear Richard. But Richard did not talk as he played. He took his game seriously. And she knew just how he looked when he played—that eager, intent look upon his face, the quick, lithe movement of his young, graceful body, the tricks he had with his feet as he waited for a ball, that other with which he tugged at his belt when he muffed a shot.

Oh, Richard, Richard . . .

Mavis should not have him, to run into her dull, uninteresting mould. Not Mavis's children should live and shout in this old garden. Any man would do for Mavis—any decent man who wanted a home and children and cared nothing at all for the life of the imagination, or for the ideal. Her young, impetuous Richard was not for her.

The cards were with herself. Virginia knew that. He would not look at Mavis so long as she was there, so long as she hadn't definitely said "no." As she lay there with Richard's image dancing before her closed eyes, she made up her mind. She would marry him—and hold her tongue.

Suddenly the tears came forcing their way through the closed eyelids. "Oh, my darling, I will make you so happy," her heart cried out, and lay like a spent thing in her breast.

Presently a step sounded on the terrace above and Richard's mother came down the stairs.

"Is Richard not here?" she asked.

Virginia's lovely smile came mechanically, and mechanically she said: "Miss Wharton carried him off for a game of tennis."

"Oh, indeed—is Miss Wharton here?"

"She came half an hour ago."

"Indeed! How very nice. I hear you have a headache, my dear."

"It's better, thank you," said Virginia.

Across the lawn Richard and Mavis came moving towards them. Virginia looked at Richard's mother and saw upon her face, crossing the look of fatuous adoration with which she always regarded Richard, a look of pleased satisfaction.

"Fool!" said Virginia to herself. "She doesn't see that she might as well give her boy to a man-eating tiger." But as the pair came on she wondered if that was just it—if, tired herself of being ruled, Dorothy Saxton wanted to introduce some woman into the house who would get her own way, who would keep even old Mrs. Saxton in her place. But one way or the other it was equally bad for Richard. As he came up, she gave him her most deliberate and brilliant smile, and had in exchange a quick, sweetly intimate look that but for the rest had been a kiss.

"Headache better?" he inquired.

"Vanished!" she replied.

"Oh, jolly good. Then we can have our walk after lunch."

"If your grandmother doesn't want me."

"Oh, never fear . . . I'll square grandmother. . . . Come to that, Mavis can read to her a bit."

Said Mavis coldly: "Reading aloud isn't my strong point."

Richard laughed. "Don't let that deter you—it isn't Virginia's either."

Virginia saw the colour come into Mavis's face and the pleased satisfaction run off his mother's like water from an umbrella. *Virginia*, indeed! She said quietly:

"Did you have a good game?"

"Mavis did," said Richard. "She beat me hollow, didn't you, Mavis?"

"Very hollow," said Mavis.

Virginia smiled. She thought, as she looked at her: "You would—always, all the time . . ." and hated her profoundly.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

VIRGINIA was not the granddaughter of Ruth Hussey for nothing. Having made up her mind as to her line of conduct, she did not waver. That same certainty and precision of judgment which had impelled her to throw in her lot with Stacey Russell now upheld her. She did not *feel* wicked. She never had. And the memory of Stacey, light-heartedly quoting Nietzsche, came to support her. *What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil.* She would not recognize the fact that, after all, it hadn't *been* "love"—that neither she nor Stacey were entitled to drape that flag about the coffin of their dead relationship. On his part vanity, a brief and gusty passion. And on hers? Flattered vanity, too, ignorance and the sight of an open door, long barred. She had gone with him without fear and without regret. For she had left behind her nothing that mattered. Her life, for the moment, was hid in his.

Neither had she regretted when the first doubts assailed her, when she had suspected that this idyll was to spread itself across no sunny Eternity, when she came to a shadowy understanding of the febrile nature of Stacey's affection, when Sylvia's letter had realized her last doubt upon the matter. And she bore no grudges. She remained grateful to him for the first piece of real happiness which had come her way, and which had seemed worth everything it had cost her. Only, now, with her young and ardent soul running out to meet love in another, she began to doubt. When she thought of Richard she wished, vaguely yet with a hint of something that was not vague at all, for all she could not give it a name, that there had never been any Stacey—that the gloom and emptiness of her life had prevailed until Richard had come. Not to have had Richard as the Fairy Prince, that beyond doubt was something she had missed. Yet, after all, no Stacey, no Richard: for she would never have come to Huish Priors but for the things which had happened to her through Stacey. You couldn't cut out little bits of your life, as you pleased, accepting this, rejecting that. And young as she was she knew that it was not only useless but a little trivial to

repine over mistakes; and she closed her mind with firmness against regrets and indecisions.

Re-reading that chapter in *Tess*, where Hardy's heroine makes confession to Clare Angel, she was but confirmed in her attitude. The tragic Tess accepted the ruling of her day and generation: not to put too fine a point upon it, she did not appear, Virginia thought, to be a person of great intelligence.

She knew that if Richard asked her again to marry him she would say "yes."

He did not ask her again that week, and then, suddenly, he was gone. A long-promised visit to a relative at the other end of England removed him for a month from the sphere of Virginia's hopes and longings, and all she had to console her was the sight of the long, fine handwriting upon envelopes which came for his mother and grandmother, and which she knew to be his. But he did not write to her.

The sight of his handwriting filled her with a sweet, secret rapture, and she found that she thought of him every moment of the day when her mind was not actively employed with something else. If it were disengaged for so much as one single moment, Richard strode in and took possession, and presently she found that she could not keep him out. He came into all the hours and interests of the day: he permeated her life, her whole existence. He was mixed up with everything she said or thought or did, so that it almost seemed as if, without him, she had no existence at all—as though if he did not come back soon she must die.

II

He came back at the beginning of September, and it fell to her lot to meet him. She never forgot the look on his face when he came striding through the station gates and saw her sitting there in the driving-seat of the high, light-brown dogcart that was so familiar a feature of the countryside. And Richard, perhaps, never forgot the look on hers. It told them both what each wanted to know, so that they had no need of words and rode home almost in silence.

It was a lovely afternoon, soft-aired and warm, with the gold just touching the green pale grass and golden stubble out on the fields, and in the woods the first autumn violets. Above all a sky of tender blue and the floating scents of autumn.

"Couldn't we, perhaps, turn off and drive down through the

"Stacey, my dear child, never cared like that for anyone. 'I don't blame him for that, either. He was made that way. But I do blame him for taking advantage of your ignorance and romanticism. You hadn't the faintest idea what you were giving away. Stacey had. But that's all past and done with, the only thing that matters now is that you don't let a mistake of that kind spoil your whole life. Now come and have lunch, and we can go on talking while we have it, for we shall be alone."

II

During the meal, Virginia's gaucherie and shyness dropped from her. It ceased to be fantastic that she should be there talking to the woman who had been Stacey's wife. She found herself giving confidence after confidence, pouring out her young heart in a fashion she had never believed possible, and presently Sylvia inquired:

"What sort of a job have you in mind?"

Virginia said, quite simply:

"I don't know. I thought that perhaps you . . ."

"You don't want to read to any more old ladies . . . or write their letters?"

"No." Virginia was emphatic and clear about that, anyhow.

"And what about typewriting and shorthand?"

"That takes a long while to learn, doesn't it?"

"A year, perhaps."

"No, I'm afraid that wouldn't do either, then. You see, I haven't any money . . . now . . . except what I saved at Huish Priors . . . about forty pounds. Besides, that would be writing letters, too, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose it would. Different letters, though."

"I suppose it's fearfully hard to find something for some one to do who has had absolutely *no* training, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid it is, rather."

"Isn't there anything you can be trained for *free* . . . a sort of apprentice?"

"Do you like children?"

"I haven't known many."

"How many?"

"Well . . . I went—after Stacey went to Africa—to look after two children for a woman in Essex."

"Did you like that?"

"I can't remember very well. The children were rather nice, I think."

Sylvia smiled. "I see. . . . I wonder how you would like Stephanie House. I must have a word with John about it."

"What is Stephanie House?"

"Well, it's a clinic for poor women and children run by women. . . ."

"A sort of hospital?"

"Yes. . . . It's in the hands of a woman-doctor—a friend of my husband's. Can you do book-keeping?"

"I don't think so. I used to keep Mrs. Saxton's accounts for her, but they were easy. Still, I could learn, couldn't I?"

"I'm sure you could. Let's go and have coffee in our little London garden, shall we? And then, if you aren't too tired, what about coming to the shops with me and helping me choose a country hat?"

"I'd love to. . . . Are you going into the country for your—for your holiday?"

"Yes, to Cornwall. A little known part—Porteath. My husband has a little house there—a few miles from Port Isaac. I haven't seen it yet. You must come and see us there later on."

Sitting in the little crazy-paved garden, with its one tree, the inevitable plane, already shedding its leaves, and with its green-tubbed shrubs, Virginia felt that life had indeed begun again. At tea-time she remembered, with a little pang, that she had not once thought of Richard all day long except for that short interval when it had been necessary to talk about him to Sylvia Shelley. And as she stirred her tea and glanced across the room in which she sat, she thought: "I must be very fickle," and felt very vague and thin and unreal.

She wondered how much Sylvia Shelley's husband knew about her, and when he came in to dinner that evening gave him a very straight glance from her dark eyes, as if that could help her to find out. She liked the look of him—his keen, alert face, his broad shoulders, his look of general fitness, his genial manner and the way he held her hand just a second longer than was necessary, and the kind reassuring way he smiled upon her. But neither he nor Sylvia talked of her, the purpose of her visit or of anything in the very least personal; neither was any further reference made to Stephanie House. They talked of Mr. Bernard

Shaw, who was reputed to have said that any grown-up guilty of the crime of trying to form the character of children ought to be drowned, and about a young girl of thirteen who had referred somewhere to "The Lady of Shalott" as "a fairy tale I remembered in my childhood," which seemed to amuse them enormously, and about the newly-arrived motor-car and the cinematograph and about the guerilla warfare in South Africa, and about a story of Henry James's then running in *Punch*, and about a new novel called *The Column*, by Charles Marriott, of whom Virginia had never heard—an impersonal kind of conversation, for which her sojourn with Stacey Russell and the Saxtons had helped to fit her, so that she went to bed feeling as if she were an old friend they had not seen for years, and whom they were very glad to have with them.

Sylvia went upstairs with her to her room, opened the door, looked round, saw that she had everything she wanted and kissed her good night.

"Sleep well," she said, and left her.

III

She went down one flight of stairs and knocked at the door of her husband's study, whither he had gone half an hour before to write letters.

"May I come in?" she said.

John Shelley looked up from the folding of his last letter.

"Rather," he said.

Sylvia came in quickly, shut the door and came and seated herself in the arm-chair by his desk. This room affected her strangely. In it how many people had heard news both good and ill, seated, perhaps, in that very chair in which she now sat? How many women had looked with anxious eyes upon this man who smiled at her now so intimately, as the arbiter of their fate? How many had he sent away—relieved or in despair? How many had he been able to help?

She said: "How's your bad patient?"

"Much less bad."

"We'll be able to go on Saturday?"

"Pretty certainly, I think. Glad?"

She smiled at him by way of answer.

"Is it going to be much of a rush? Isn't there anything I can do—any more letters to write?"

"No, thanks, my dear—Harvey comes back to-morrow. He can deal with things. You've hammered away on that old Barlock often enough this last fortnight."

"Why shouldn't I help?"

"You do. . . ."

"Other people, mostly, not you. . . ."

"Rubbish!" He put out a hand and she slipped hers into it.

"How nice you look! And how nice you *are*!"

Again she seemed to find words unnecessary.

"What about this young woman of yours? Virginia. . . ."

"Virginia Brodie. I want to talk to you about her."

"But you did, the other day. I heard about the jaunt to Italy, with your late lamented. She must have been just out of her cradle. How old is she now?"

"Nineteen . . . nearly twenty. She doesn't look it, does she? The Italy incident simply doesn't show at all. Nice-looking, isn't she—and nice, too."

"I'm sure she is. What's she been doing with herself since . . . since Italy?"

"Reading to an old lady, writing her letters . . . and falling in love with her young grandson."

"Oh . . .!"

"I know . . . only it isn't like that, really. . . . It was a boy and girl idyll—though I gather it would have ended in marriage if the aunt hadn't developed a conscience about the Stacey incident."

"Poor kid! I thought she looked a bit strung up. What are you going to do with her?"

"I don't know. She hasn't been trained for anything, of course, falling into the abyss like that at seventeen. And now, I gather, there's no money."

"You mean that Stacey . . . Did she tell you?"

"No, she hasn't any idea I gleaned that little bit of news. I don't know how much it was nor how she came, at seventeen, to have the handling of it."

John Shelley withdrew his hand. "That young man of yours! My God, Sylvia, *how* did you ever stick it?"

"He had his good points."

"You would excuse His Satanic Majesty himself!"

Sylvia smiled. "Marie Corelli made a gentleman of *him* once—the only gentleman in the book, I seem to remember. Stacey could be very charming—if you didn't happen to be

married to him. In that case the charm was usually directed at somebody else. Possession was quite remarkably fatal to his appreciation of anything."

"Did you know about this girl at the time?"

"I knew there was somebody. It was always safe to assume that. I found out afterwards he'd met her when he used to go and stay with Ethel Eliot. Ethel had rather a lot to say about it afterwards, but not at the time. If she'd told me she was a mere schoolgirl I might have been able to stop it. I'd have had a good try, anyway. I've always felt somehow that I ought to have looked after Stacey more than I did; but by the time Virginia came along I was tired, and I'm afraid I'd got to the point when I rather gave him his head. He was so much more amiable that way."

"You ought to have left him long before."

"Perhaps. But, you see, I could never help feeling a little sorry for him. He counted on me. I was always the harbour to which he steered when it was all over. And really, he *was* a charming person, John. If you didn't want—or appreciate—faithfulness, there wasn't so much against him, even as a husband."

"But you did."

"Yes . . . that was what he always thought so unreasonable of me."

John looked at her.

"I believe you're the only woman in the world who'd want to help her husband's cast-off mistress."

"No, you don't. You know quite well that women aren't anything like so possessive or so . . . beastly . . . to their own sex as the masculine tradition has it. *No* decent woman would owe this child any grudge. Any woman'd want to help her to understand it wasn't a tragedy . . . but only an incident."

"D'you think it *is*?"

"Of course. Love—what looked like love—*can't* be a tragedy at that age, unless we're sentimentalists who think that virginity is a state of holiness, or materialists who give it merely a market value. A thing like this *needn't* be a tragedy."

"Supposing there'd been a child?"

"I knew there wouldn't be—that was the one thing that always consoled me."

"You *knew*?"

"Well, I was pretty certain there wouldn't be. . . . You see

I'd lived with Stacey for seven years without having a child—and I'd taken the trouble to find out that it wasn't my fault. Besides, I happened to know that Stacey would have been seriously perturbed by paternity."

"Lucky for Miss Virginia."

"I know. So you see, this *isn't* a tragedy for reasonable people. That aunt doesn't count, though I admit she's rather a disaster. The thing to do is to get the child's mind *off* that side of life altogether."

"Find her something to do, you mean?"

"Yes. She wants to get away from the disastrous aunt—and she *does* want to find something to do—not for quite our reasons, I admit—yet. But that doesn't matter."

"Have you got anything in mind?"

"Yes—Stephanie House."

John stopped twisting the paper-knife and looked at her quickly.

"And what do you imagine in the name of Heaven she can do there?"

"Well, I don't propose that she should do anything on the nursing side. I know Maud Norman won't take probationers, and in any case will only have hospital-trained nurses. But I remember that she said recently that she did want somebody to do the sort of thing her sister-in-law did. . . ."

"Not dispensing?"

"No. . . . Mrs. Norman didn't dispense all the time. She used to see the patients, take particulars about them . . . to keep the accounts. A sort of lady-almoner-secretary. Maud's never had anybody *permanent* since Mrs. Norman went . . . and Virginia's not without experience—she wouldn't be shocked. . . . Besides, I rather fancy she'd like to make herself useful in the crèche."

John Shelley looked thoughtful.

"My dear Sylvia! Eve Norman—and this child! Think of the difference! Maud'd have a fit."

"Well, I don't suggest she starts at once. . . . She'd want a six months' book-keeping course, for one thing. She could divide her time between that and the clinic, couldn't she? Couldn't you talk to Maud Norman about it before we go . . . or are you going to be too busy?"

"I can see her, certainly, but I can't promise you that I'll be

very successful. You know Maud's all for Efficiency, with a very large capital. She'd not have had her sister-in-law inside the place if she hadn't taken exams, and been besides so confoundedly capable."

"Yes, I know," said Sylvia, who was aware that her husband was an ardent admirer of Eve—Mrs. Frank—Norman. "But doesn't Virginia strike you as . . . potentially efficient, too?"

"She's quiet and self-controlled."

"And she has character. Oh, John, we *must* help to give her a chance."

"Well, I'll do what I can. I'll go and see Maud Norman first thing to-morrow. Can you keep the girl here till lunch, say?"

"Over-night, if necessary."

"Then that's—that, rather. Isn't it?"

"Thank you, John . . . I think it is."

"Come here, darling."

She came and sat on the arm of his chair.

"Well?" he asked, his hand turning up her chin.

"I do love you, John," she said.

"Good."

"I can't imagine how I've lived for thirty-two years without you."

"Nor I forty-five without you."

"You're different—you had your work. An unhappy or unsatisfactory marriage is less terrible for a busy man. I've been such an unoccupied, useless person. . . ."

She put her face against his, moved her soft cheek against his, not speaking.

"It ought to be good at Porteath. . . . I wonder if you'll like it there. . . ."

"You don't wonder at all. You know I'll adore it."

"Do I? I hope you will. . . . It's a lovely piece of coast. We go down through a disused and haunted orchard to bathe, and at night the world's empty. You can't imagine anything so quiet—we're just too far away from it to hear the sea . . . though you can catch a sight of it . . . if it's a fine night . . . just a line of silver a long way below."

"I've never been to Cornwall," she said. "Except to Newquay—and that doesn't count, I suppose?"

"Of course it doesn't. I say, darling, I hope there'll be a moon."

"There will be at the end of the first week. Harvest moon, too."

. They sat quite still after that, not speaking, and the young and tender moon which was to shine for them presently like a lantern in the western country, slipped down the sky and looked in on them now in passing.

"I feel about ten," said John presently. "I can't believe I performed an operation for fistula two days ago. . . ."

"And married me two hours afterwards."

"Ah . . . I can believe *that* all right. . . ."

IV

Maud Norman said: "Tell her to come and see me at ten o'clock and not to be late. Give my love to Sylvia and say I don't make any promises."

John Shelley laughed.

"All right. May I tell Sylvia to ring you up when you've seen her?"

"Not here, then—at home, after nine. What did you say this girl's name was?"

"Brodie. Virginia Brodie. Don't forget Sylvia and I go to Cornwall on Saturday for a fortnight."

"Good lord, why?"

"We rather think we'd like a honeymoon."

"I wonder if you will. Tiresome of you, anyway. I wanted you to come and see a woman for me. I tell her she's got a duodenal ulcer and that she *must* come in and get rid of it. Her husband says 'nonsense' and I'm 'only a woman.' . . ."

"I'm to back you up?"

"Something like that. The husband's a fool, so's the woman. Doormat wife. But she's in a bad way."

"Will it do when I come back?"

"From Cornwall? She won't be dead by then, if that's what you mean."

"To-day's Thursday. Can you get hold of her to-morrow afternoon?"

"I can't promise. You can't rely on these people. I'll try. Too busy to come down on chance?"

"Much—but I will."

"Good man. I hope you and Sylvia have a good time. And tell that young woman not to be late."

Virginia was duly told, and arrived ten minutes too early; which she felt Maud Norman would think almost as bad as being late. She was admitted into a wide, white hall and taken through it to a little room at the far end which was filled with cupboards that every now and then somebody came in and opened, revealing the fact that they positively gaped with linen. But nobody took any notice of her. 'Everybody seemed to be very busy, and she felt, once again, definitely insignificant and unimportant, but did not know that that is how the completely healthy always feel in a place of the sick. And when presently somebody came and said: "Miss Brodie? This way, please," and showed her into Miss Norman's presence, she felt that she was no more than a wraith, and did not know that that was how most people felt when they first made the acquaintance of Maud Norman.

She sat before a large, conspicuously masculine desk in a room which was otherwise feminine enough. A comfortable arm-chair, a thick-piled carpet on the floor, a bowl of roses on a low table in an odd corner; on the walls coloured and pleasant things she had no time to look at, and a photograph of the loveliest child Virginia had ever seen. Maud Norman smiled very kindly upon her and said:

"Sit down, Miss Brodie. Mr. Shelley tells me you think you could be useful here, that you've had no experience of work of this kind, but that it rather appeals to you. Why?"

"I want," said Virginia simply, "to do something *useful*. . . . So far I haven't done anything that's been of any use to anybody."

"I see. You've been writing letters for an old lady, I understand . . . and reading to her. Also, I hear, you used to keep her accounts."

"They were very simple. I wouldn't like you to suppose from that that I could keep yours."

Maud laughed.

"I don't," she said. "But Mr. Shelley tells me you've some scheme of fitting in book-keeping classes in the evenings. And you can write quite tactful letters, I expect, after the old lady's. Can you use a typewriter?"

"Oh yes, Mrs. Saxton bought a new Remington for me to use."

"We can't run to anything like that. Do you think you can perform on an old and crotchety Smith-Premier?"

"I'm sure I could."

"Well, that's satisfactory. So far everybody's made a horrid mess of it. Did Mrs. Shelley tell you anything about us?"

"Enough, I think . . . I mean . . ."

Maud laughed.

"She told you this was a working women's clinic, I suppose. Did you gather from that that we *all* worked hard?"

"Yes."

"And did it frighten you?"

"No," said Virginia, and had the sense not to add anything to it.

"You look very young."

"I'm nearly twenty."

"Have you been ill, lately?"

"Oh no—I've never been ill."

"Do you always have shadows like that round your eyes? Don't know you've got them, I suppose?"

"No," said Virginia. "I'm perfectly all right."

"Well, go to bed early for the next three nights and stop worrying. How old did you say you were? Twenty? You look about sixteen. I don't know what we can do about that. However, you won't frighten the people, you see—that's something. They're a timid lot. You look as though you'd ask all the necessary questions quite nicely without scaring them to death or hurting their feelings."

"I'd try."

"Well—you may, for a month. Do you know how to use the telephone?"

"Yes."

"Then get through to Sylvia Shelley and tell her I think you'll do. And after that ask her to tell her husband that the woman I spoke to him about prefers to keep her ulcer, so there's no need for him to come up this afternoon to help persuade her to part with it."

Virginia, inwardly trembling, gave these messages apparently to Maud Norman's satisfaction, for she smiled at her when, before she put back the receiver, she inquired whether there was any further message. "No, that's all, thanks. . . . Come along on Monday, at nine sharply. Will that give you time to make your arrangements? All right, then."

She rang the bell on her desk and held out her hand.

"Come back without those shadows. . . . Good-bye."

Virginia thought she had a sweet smile, but realized suddenly that it was not entirely for her, that some part of it was certainly for the tall woman in dark blue and a very ugly hat, who, as though in answer to the bell, opened the door and stood hesitating on the threshold.

"All right, Eve. Come in. . . ."

The new-comer came in, twisted the chair Virginia had just vacated to an angle of her own choosing, and sat calmly down in it. Virginia went.

Outside she climbed on a 'bus, which took her through the bright afternoon to the Marble Arch, where she got down and walked along to Bryanston Square, as if springs had been fitted to her shoes. Sylvia was indoors, reading the book about which they had talked last night at dinner, and which she put down when Virginia came in to look up and say:

"Oh, *here* you are. Sit down and tell me all about it. Did you like Maud Norman?"

"Yes—ever so much; but I was a wee bit terrified."

"*Were* you? I'm sure you didn't show it."

"Is she very clever?"

"*We* all think so. My husband says she's a first-class surgeon, and she's fearfully keen on her job. She has a private practice, but *only* because she wants more money for the clinic. It's all she cares about. She inherits the family passion for tidying up the world. Her father and mother did it before her. Her brother helps run some settlement or other in the East End."

"Have you known her long?"

"I went to see her professionally about two years ago. Later, I was able to help her over some little matter and she invited me to dinner. I met some of her family . . . and John. *He's* known her for years."

"Did *she* start the clinic?"

"No, her father, years ago. It was just a crèche at first for poor children. He founded it and endowed it in memory of his wife—Stephanie, who died when Maud was born. They were at Liverpool then during the Cotton Famine of 1862, and it's generally believed she died because nobody could persuade her to take proper care of herself at a critical time. Maud grew up determined to be a doctor and a surgeon, and as she'd the right kind of father she achieved it. She's done wonders with the clinic; so John says. It's quite an important affair now—with an operat-

ing room and a dozen beds as well as the Out-patients' Department."

"Are there any other doctors?"

"Two or three. Women. There's always one in attendance. They all have private practices, but Maud's the moving spirit. She won't have anybody but hospital-trained nurses, and she ropes everybody in who can be of any real use. Her brother takes out teeth and her sister-in-law, Eve, used to do the dispensing, until she started having a family, and even John gets roped in sometimes, when an awkward husband turns up and wants a 'masculine' opinion upon his wife's ailments."

"I think it must have been the sister-in-law I saw. Miss Norman *did* call her 'Eve'—tall, very nice-looking with real red hair."

"And a hideous hat?"

Virginia smiled. "It was rather. But then all hats are, aren't they?"

"Yes . . . that would certainly seem to be Mrs. Frank Norman." Sylvia laughed. "The people who talk about marriage and children as an all-time job have never satisfactorily accounted for Eve Norman. She's the most energetic creature I know—she sits on Committees, works for Heaven knows how many 'improvement' societies, goes in for suffrage agitation and runs her home and her husband and children quite beautifully."

"How many children has she?"

"Three. The youngest was born last year. The middle one's lovely. . . . You probably saw her photograph in Maud's room."

"Oh, I did. But I thought it was a clinic baby."

Sylvia laughed at her comic face of disappointment. "Maud has it there as an inspiration, I expect. She thinks that's what all babies ought to look like. As a matter of fact, Monica's a delicate child, I believe, but she has the kind of features the camera loves."

Virginia sat quiet for a while, then said suddenly:

"This is going to be splendid. I feel I'm only just coming alive . . . that I've never done anything useful in my whole life. . . . I *do* hope I'll be all right . . . and not fail. It does all scare me a bit—Miss Norman, I mean."

"I know. But I feel a lot worse with Mrs. Frank. She and Maud together make me feel about as useful as a wet day at a picnic."

Virginia laughed.

"*You?* Oh, you're marvellous. Nobody else would have done all this for me after . . . what *I* did."

Suddenly she stopped laughing, put her head down on Sylvia's knee and burst into tears.

Sylvia was unutterably dismayed.

"Come, come, my child, this will *not* do. We can't keep getting back to that point. That's a thing in your life you need to forget. Stop thinking it's so important. You don't, do you, want to make me think I'm a more useless person even than I *am*?—that I can't even help *you*? Now stop crying, Virginia, and sit up and listen to some severely practical suggestions."

It was a long while before Virginia did anything of the kind, but Sylvia waited patiently, her hands resting quietly upon Virginia's heaving shoulders, her eyes watching the sunlight on her rough head, until Virginia sat up and said:

"Sorry . . . I'm not *usually* a cry-baby."

"I'm sure you're not. Now, listen. I've fixed up about the classes for book-keeping. There's a school quite near here in Oxford Street. You are to go four evenings a week for a month—from six to eight—and you're to live here at least until we come back from Cornwall. Now there isn't anything to argue about. John and I have decided it all, and you'll be no bother to anybody. I've some charming maids, and one of them is devoted to Maud Norman because she went to her for a little operation a year ago, and will do anything now out of gratitude for anybody connected with her. As for the book-keeping lessons, they cost about fourpence, and needn't worry you. That is just one of the few useful things I *can* do. Don't for goodness' sake try to deprive me of it. You're not going to earn a lot of money yet . . . and I don't want you bothered. I want to see you happy. There's no reason why you shouldn't be, just because you made a false start. It's just weak-minded to believe anything else."

"I know," said Virginia, "but all the same there just isn't any other woman in the world who, in your place, would raise a little finger to help me."

"Nonsense . . . utter nonsense. Don't go about the world repeating generalizations about women. Run upstairs and get rid of the sight of all that quite unnecessary emotion, and then we'll have an early lunch and pack you off back to the country

by the two o'clock train. I've written a little note to your aunt, and have suggested in it that you come back here at tea-time on Sunday, so that you can be on the spot for Monday morning. I shan't be here, but you will be expected, so don't fail."

V

At ten o'clock that night the telephone rang.

"Maud Norman!" said Sylvia, for that was always the hour Maud chose for her telephonic conversations, after she had seen her last patient and had eaten the oranges with which her day invariably ended. "Will you answer it?"

John got up, said "Hallo!" several times and then appeared to listen. Finally he said, "You wait a moment. I'll get Sylvia."

So Sylvia went to the 'phone and said:

"Hallo, Maud." But all Maud wanted, apparently, was to wish her good-bye and to tell her to take care of herself and not to get drowned. "It's a dangerous piece of coast."

"Never fear. I hope my little friend will come up to scratch."

"Oh, the Brodie girl. Yes, I liked her, but is she delicate? She *said* she'd never been ill in her life."

"I don't think she has. She's quite strong."

"What is it, then? Love?"

"She has, I believe, just had a rather unhappy love affair, but it's over."

"You mean that's all you're going to tell me? All right. I shan't keep her long, anyway."

"Why not?"

"She's a honeypot, isn't she!"

"A honeypot?"

"Don't be dense. Men, my dear."

"You mean men find her attractive! Yes, I suppose they do. But, Maud, she's serious about this. She's very keen."

"I'm glad to hear it. There *is* a job here for her, if she can fit herself for it. I'll report when you get back. Ring me up. I hope you'll like Cornwall and your treacle-moon. Good night, my dear."

Sylvia put up the receiver and turned round to John.

"Did she say that to you?"

"About the honeypot? Yes."

"Oh, John . . . I *do* hope she isn't right. Is she so very attractive—from the male point of view?"

"Yes . . . but men are going to like her a little less now, because she's growing up, developing a character. She'll flatter them less by seeming to regard them as the key to existence, and the chances are that already she no longer so regards them."

Sylvia said suddenly:

"It's the one thing I can't forgive Stacey for—taking that child."

"Oh, my dear, don't think of that any more. You've forgiven him for so much."

"But not for that, John. Whenever I think of her I know I haven't—and that I never shall."

"I don't suppose you're right—and if you are it doesn't matter. Stacey's dead, anyhow."

"But that's the worst of it. It's dreadful, John, not to be able to forgive a person something when he's dead. Death ought to wash out everything."

"It doesn't wash out consequences. Ever. Don't be sentimental, darling. Come and kiss me."

But as she continued to sit there by the telephone looking worried, he went over, pulled her up against him, and kissed her instead. That done, he held her away and looked at her.

"It suits you to be kissed."

"Suits me? You mean I like it?"

"No . . . I mean it likes you. Go and look at yourself in the glass."

She went obediently, but she saw in the glass what she had often seen, these days, before—the face of a woman quietly and deeply satisfied. John came behind her, and, putting his hands over her breasts, drew her gently back, so that her face was against his.

"Happy?" he asked her.

She moved her face softly against his for reply, but his hand was on her heart; he knew.

CHAPTER TWO

I

WHILST Sylvia Shelley went to her happiness in Cornwall, Virginia took the first tentative steps in that new adult existence of hers which ran almost without a break for a term of close upon six years. Once again she lived quietly and happily, as at Huish Priors, immutably in the Present without memory or regret. Life wrote itself down steadily upon the turned page of her book of life as a thing of usefulness and interest; and she was immensely happy in this world of busy women in which she had found for herself a place. Women she had lived with all her life—and had had various and changing emotions concerning it; but here, for the first time in her experience, she lived among a band of women who cared for their jobs pre-eminently. Better health for women, a better world for them and for their children. They cared for these above all things.

Virginia who had never so much as rubbed shoulders with natural and ingrained poverty, who came of a long line of men and women who had never even looked over the high walls that cut them off from the poor and wretched, stared through dismayed eyes at the women, the particulars of whose lives, in those first six months, she recorded in the books of Stephanie House. Most of them were young, in the twenties and early thirties; most of them had families that showed a yearly tendency to increase, all of them had husbands intermittently employed and wretchedly paid, and most of them, when they were not engaged with the yearly or bi-yearly baby, themselves helped to swell the family exchequer. Their proudest boast was that with none of their children had they ever missed "more than a week at the wash-tub." They accepted their lives as beasts of burden uncomplainingly, as if they knew what life was and were not minded to make an undue song about the inevitable. Some of them were so obviously ill they could hardly stand on their feet, and Virginia would purposely spin out their business with them so that she might keep them, those cold and cheerless wintry mornings in that comfortable chair by the fire.

"I expect, you know," she would say sometimes, "that Dr. Norman will want you to come in."

Instant fright would show in the patient's face.

"Oh, I couldn't do that, miss . . . 'e can't do for 'imself, you see."

Virginia had got used to the fact that "'e" was always the first consideration, not the children. There was always a neighbour who would look after those who went to school and the crèche would take those who did not. But for the lords of the house!

"I'm afraid Dr. Norman won't think that a very good excuse."

"Won't she, miss? . . ."

"We'd make you very comfortable, you know. You'd like us. And you'd get better a lot quicker, besides."

"Yes, miss. I'm not saying I wouldn't, but 'e's a poor one at doin' a hand's turn for himself and 'e ain't got no patience with the children, neither. . . ."

Virginia would finish with her dossier, say something soothing, pass the patient on to Maud Norman or to Dr. Millar or to Miss MacLaren.

"Doormat wives" Maud Norman called them, with no idea that they had lives of their own and some strange idea that they had no right to a clean bill of health. To be a woman, they seemed to think, was only another way of saying "invalid." They no more expected to be unplagued of their bodies than to be able to say, for certain, on Monday, that there would be any dinner to eat on Friday. Virginia, with health superabundant and reliable, had no knowledge that even here, at the beginning of the twentieth century, she was in a small, if growing, minority. She supposed that ill-health, in women, was a concomitant of this excessive grinding poverty to which she was now introduced, a delusion soon destroyed for her when she began to look at some of the books upon Maud Norman's shelves and to scrape acquaintance with the gloomy masculine minds that regarded women (amongst other equally depressing things) as a perambulating infirmity.

In those early days the growing knowledge of those sickly, under-nourished women depressed her. She threw herself into the business of writing up their dossiers and helping to amuse their children in the crèche, as if in some way this small thing she could do was something she owed these women so much less fortunate than herself. Maud Norman was pleased with her

and gave her the opportunity in the Spring of nineteen-two to take up her quarters at Stephanie House. Virginia, who had been most uncomfortably housed ever since that day in October when against the Shelleys' wish, she insisted upon leaving their house in Bryanston Square, accepted with an alacrity which was the measure not only of her present discomfort but of her anticipation of deepened and more general communication with Maud Norman and the other women with whom she worked and whom she so whole-heartedly admired. She betook herself and her modest belongings to the little room at the top of Stephanie House which looked out over the roofs of London, and seemed, to Virginia, to be a window leaning out of Heaven.

Of the two other women in charge of Stephanie House, only one, Grace MacLaren, lived on the premises. Evelyn Millar shared a private practice in Bayswater Road with Maud Norman. Very slim and pale, she was about Maud's age, which Virginia judged to be still in the very early thirties. They had studied medicine and surgery about the same time in Edinburgh and Glasgow, going to Dublin and to Paris for special midwifery classes; but Grace MacLaren was a much older woman and her training and experience belonged to an earlier day altogether, when medical training for women could only be obtained under the most difficult and discouraging conditions, when, for all University Commissions might sit and decide, the working out of such decisions were left in the hands of men determined to keep women out; when classes were refused, clinical teaching could be obtained at only a few hospitals; when extra fees were dragged out of women students, and yet the teaching given was perfunctory and the professors gave the "off-scourings" of their minds and unpunctual attendance. Grace MacLaren had been present at the historic riot outside Surgeons' Hall, Edinburgh, in the November of eighteen-seventy; she had known Edith Pechey who had won the Hope scholarship in eighteen-sixty-nine but had not been allowed to take it up, and had had to stand by and see it given to the man whose name came below hers on the list.

"But why?" a deeply interested Virginia wanted to know.

Grace MacLaren laughed.

"Because they didn't want us . . . and thought we ought to be frozen out. They weren't going to make things easy for us."

Virginia thought it amazing. She simply could not understand why men should not want women to become doctors.

Again Grace MacLaren seemed amused.

"Their natural feelings of delicacy were violated by the mere idea of the presence of women in the lecture room."

"But why? They didn't mind women nurses—or women patients."

"There probably is some answer to that," Grace MacLaren said, "but I never have been able to discover what it is. If they'd been classical scholars they'd have known that there were women of medicine in ancient Greece. However, they weren't."

"It must have been exciting," Virginia said.

"Fighting for things? Yes, it always is. It'll be a pity, in a way, when there's nothing left for women to fight for."

"Oh, but there always will be," said Virginia, unexpectedly.

Grace MacLaren looked at her amusedly.

"What makes you think so?" she inquired.

"I don't know . . . I just feel it."

"You're probably right. Anyway, I foresee that directly women get the vote it will be assumed that they've got everything and heaven will be expected to come down to earth in a day and a night. When women have had the vote for ten years men will begin to ask what they have done with it and will answer their own question—'Nothing.' They'll never see that it is a highly improper question; one that ought not to be asked inside of a hundred years. I don't share Dr. Norman's political cynicism, but I'm pretty sure votes for women will be little more than a symbol of freedom for many years to come. To hear some women talk you'd think it was going to usher in the millennium."

"But won't having a vote help—in time—to do away with poverty?"

"It might. But I think it very unlikely. Men have had the vote for some time now . . . and they haven't been able to do much. It's this system which produces poverty—and the birth-rate. If you could keep that stationary for three years, even without radically altering things at the bottom, we could do something. But that's not going to be done."

Said Virginia: "A woman came in here the other day with seven children. She wanted to find out if she was going to have another. Dr. Norman said she was and was very angry after she'd gone. All her children have something the matter with them, and her husband, who's out of work at the moment, has never earned more than thirty shillings a week since

they've been married."

"I know. It's like pouring water into a sieve to do anything with conditions like that. Yet what is there to do? And it's something, I suppose, to alleviate suffering, even if you can't prevent it. It's a funny world, but we shan't improve it by sitting here saying so when we ought to be in bed. . . . Run along and get your beauty sleep."

II

Maud Norman said unexpectedly to Virginia one day: "How long have you known Sylvia Shelley?"

Virginia was angry because for some reason or other the colour came surging up into her face. She said: "About two years, I think." It wasn't really true, unless you counted that letter of Sylvia's as the beginning (as perhaps it was) of their acquaintance; but Virginia was glad she had given that answer because of the question that followed it.

"Then I suppose you knew her precious first husband?"

Her colour deepening, Virginia said: "Yes, I did."

Maud nodded.

"You know Sylvia's going to have a baby?"

"Yes. In the summer, isn't it to be?"

"July."

"She's very pleased," said Virginia. Her voice was very quiet and the tell-tale colour was ebbing out of her face.

"I know. So'm I. I told her two years ago she could and I'm never really sure she believed me. Her first husband used, I believe, to explain his deficiencies as a husband by the fact that she didn't have a child."

Up came the treacherous colour in Virginia's face again, as the years slipped by like the back-cloth of a stage. She heard Stacey Russell's very attractive voice gently explaining what a deprivation his wife's "inability" had been to him; and the colour waved in her face like a flag when she remembered how noble she had thought him because he would not permit her, Virginia, to make up by giving him a child. Oh, would she ever get over the ignominy of that initial mistake or from the sense of misery and disgust which swept over her whenever she remembered it or contemplated the mere thought of Sylvia? It seemed to her that Maud Norman must read the truth for herself in her face. But Maud had finished with Stacey Russell and, for the moment, with

Sylvia's prospective baby. She said: "I've just persuaded Mrs. Lingham to come in to-morrow and have that abscess of hers attended to. But I don't think we're out of the wood yet. Her husband 'doesn't believe in operations.' If he turns up with her let me know, if I'm here, will you? If not, tell Miss MacLaren."

"We seem," said Virginia, "to have a lot of trouble with husbands."

"Yes. None of the women who come here is exactly an advertisement for matrimony."

"They're not exactly advertisements for anything, are they?" Virginia asked.

Maud Norman laughed.

"I'm afraid they're not," she said.

So, busy, occupied, happy, Virginia grew up.

It was extraordinary how full and satisfying life had become; how far away and how dim was that early existence, when two bad-tempered women ruled her life between them. Those years belonged to some previous existence in which, unaccountably, she had got lost. Even that brief passionate interlude on Como was thin and vague now in her mind; it lived there as the inexplicable meaningless act of a very young, very silly and untrained girl. It had begun, she thought, to be that, in the first moment of her meeting with Sylvia Shelley; and yet it did not seem to matter. She could scarcely believe it had ever happened.

And Richard? Richard, too, belonged to some other life, but one which she had not yet forgotten sufficiently to have dropped into that deep pool of quiet in which all the rest of the things concerned with this other life had disappeared.

She carried about with her still the sweetness and glamour of those days when young love had run out to meet young love; when the birds sang and the sun shone only that love's purposes might be served. There were still times when, if she shut her eyes, she could see Richard sitting up there on the south wall above the fig-tree, looking down upon her and inviting . . . no, daring . . . her to come up beside him. And she could see herself standing there, her face against the roses she had plucked; drenched she would be afresh with their remembered sweetness, would hear Richard talking about that farmer who, years before, had ploughed his fields by steam.

("Doesn't steam-ploughing interest you? . . . What *does* interest you, Virginia?")

"Hearing you calling me Virginia.")

And she could still, sometimes, see Richard running, that last day, away from her and panic rushing down upon her like a living thing.

But she did not often close her eyes and permit herself to see these things. Richard was not for her. Neither was love nor marriage. She had turned her back on both. She had muddled that side of life quite hopelessly. But there were others. She had joined the sisterhood of humanity, and for the first time, as it seemed to her, looked life in the face. Courage she had never been lacking in: and courage did not fail her now. There was a lot of life left and she found it as exhilarating as ever.

She had no tears to shed when she read the announcement of Richard's forthcoming marriage to Mavis Wharton, but her heart twisted in her breast in pity, not for herself, but for Richard. She remembered Mavis as she had seen her that first morning—tall, white, rather angular, very muscular; and the tones of her ringing, incisive voice lived in her memory.

("Did you have a good game?"

"Mavis did . . . she beat me hollow, didn't you, Mavis?"

"Very hollow . . .")

She put the paper down and found something energetic to do. But through her mind all the time ran that little wisp of a thought: "Poor Richard . . . *silly* Richard, not to know that you'd have been better off, a thousand times, with me. . . ."

The beginning of the end of Richard.

SRINAGAR
NO.....

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CHAPTER THREE

I

FRANCES HUSSEY died in the Spring of nineteen-three which followed Virginia's twenty-first birthday in the November. She was forty-four and had kept something of her early abundant good looks; but she was, in essentials, an old woman. Virginia considered she had died of the pneumonia which attacked her only because it really wasn't worth while to recover.

Virginia had gone down to Lodshott when they sent for her—gone with a certain degree of impatience in her young heart, for she hated leaving her work and she had not seen her aunt since that day she had presented Sylvia Shelley's letter and her own ultimatum. Frances Hussey had not opposed the plan. She had, indeed, said very little, beyond inquiring if "they—these people at this hospital-affair" knew anything about her.

"By 'anything' I suppose you mean the one thing? Well, I don't know and I don't care. The people recommending me do—whether the others do or don't doesn't matter. It wouldn't interest them, anyway."

"You're very certain and very hard, Virginia. I'm sorry to see it. A little humility . . . a little repentance for your sin would surely be becoming."

"Sin?" said the new self-composed Virginia she did not know. "Sin, with you, is always one thing—sex. I recognize others, much more deadly—cruelty, self-righteousness, for example."

Frances Hussey's face flushed, but all she said was:

"Is that all you have to say?"

"It is all I'm going to say—save good-bye."

Frances Hussey said good-bye and was understood to say that she would pray for her.

"Don't bother the Almighty on my account," Virginia said and she laughed, wondering once again if Aunt Frankie's God had a sense of humour and rather doubting it.

To old Martha Gray she said good-bye much more fondly.

"Aye . . . I'm sorry you're going, Miss Virginia, and so is she, though she'll never say so. I hope you're going to be happy, my dear."

"I'm going to find out if what you said was true, Martha—that love isn't the only thing in the world, after all."

"Ah, that's true enough . . . true enough. But your aunt's one of those that didn't know it in time and she's let it spoil her life. Don't you go thinking hardly of her, Miss Virginia."

"I don't suppose I'll think of her much at all," Virginia said, aware of all the things there would now be to occupy her attention.

And neither had she.

She had not come to Lodshott when Martha Gray had died, less than six months after her departure. She had written for Christmas, but she had not come and she had not understood until she saw her aunt on her death-bed how deeply the old woman's death had affected her. The woman in Martha's place was much younger and harder and seriously annoyed at the thought that a strong, hearty, middle-aged woman, such as her employer seemed to be, should get an illness of this kind and take it so hardly. Virginia, half-way to her twenty-second year, had acquired a way with awkward people that annoyed Martha Gray's successor considerably, so that she took herself off and Virginia found herself forced to take over the direction of the house until a substitute could be found. But it suddenly became plain that Frances Hussey would need no new housekeeper and three days after Virginia's arrival she died.

The night before her death she said suddenly to Virginia, who sat by her side:

"I see that . . . the wife of that young man . . . of yours . . . has had a son . . ."

Virginia said quietly: "Richard Saxton, you mean? Yes, it was in the papers at the beginning of last week."

"His photo was in the paper, too. Very nice-looking, I thought. . . . You ought to have married him, Virginia."

"You didn't think so, if you remember, Aunt Frankie, then. But it doesn't matter now."

"I've got something to tell you about that, Virginia . . . you always thought I gave you away. . . . I didn't. . . ."

"But Richard knew."

"He didn't know . . . until you told him."

"I don't understand, Aunt Frankie . . . but it doesn't matter. I don't think it need trouble either of us any more, ever. Please lie still and don't worry."

"But I want you to know I never gave you away. . . . I never wrote to his grandmother or to his mother."

"I see," said Virginia, but she didn't. Neither did she want to do so. "Lie still and try to sleep. . . . It doesn't matter about Richard any more."

"But I want you to know I hadn't any hand in it. . . . If you hadn't gone off like that, it would have been all right."

Virginia's heart moved a little painfully in her breast. She thought: *It was a trick. She meant him to know—but she meant me to tell him.* How mean! And how like Aunt Frank! She felt a little sick, but she was not conscious of anger. Anger was no longer an emotion that belonged to this crisis in her affairs. It was done and finished with and the things it had brought to destruction no longer mattered. She said, very gently: "I see. . . . Thank you for telling me, but it doesn't matter any longer, Aunt Frank. . . . Please don't distress yourself about it. I'm not unhappy about it any more."

Frances Hussey lay there for a long while without saying anything. But presently she muttered: "It does matter . . . you ought to have married him . . . you were too hasty . . . too hasty," until she fell into something that might have been a doze or semi-unconsciousness.

Virginia sat there at her bedside for a long while, with the tears pouring quietly down her face. But she did not know why she was crying. Not because of Richard, she was certain. Richard, married to Mavis and father of a son. Perhaps because of the wasteful thing that life was, because of human folly, the paltriness of human motives, because of the lives (feminine lives, did she mean especially?) that ran away to Death like water under a bridge.

II

When Frances Hussey's will was read Virginia found that she had been left an annuity of five hundred pounds. The rest of the Hussey funds went to various religious and charitable organisations; including three hundred pounds of which Death had robbed Martha Gray.

Virginia cared nothing for the money, as such, but she hugged the thought of her annuity because it meant freedom and the opportunity to do some of the things she had wanted to do among the sick women of Notting Hill.

But when she suggested to Maud Norman that she should now give her services to the clinic for no salary, that decided young woman said only: "Why?"

"Well, I don't want five hundred a year to live on."

"My dear child, the labourer is worthy of his hire. We pay our dispenser—I did even when I employed my sister-in-law, Mrs. Norman, so why should you work for nothing?"

Virginia laughed.

"Because I've five hundred a year and Mrs. Norman probably hasn't."

"Being a wife, you mean? Well, yes, the people who complain of the unfairness of the law under which a man is responsible for his wife's debts and under which she can't be made bankrupt appear to overlook the fact that that is because the normal condition of wives is bankruptcy. Even the law can't get blood out of a stone. All the same, Mrs. Norman didn't care about the money. *She'd* have worked for nothing, too, if I'd let her. But it's a rotten principle. Besides, you'll have income-tax to pay on your five hundred. Do what you like with what remains, but don't talk nonsense about working for nothing until you've a good deal more than that will be."

Virginia said ruefully: "What a bother money is."

"Not having it is a good deal worse. It isn't money, it's the money standard that's the matter—having the money-mind, which means developing your acquisitive instincts at the expense of all the others. To read the novelists and poets you'd think the business of life is love—whereas, of course, it's property—possessions; getting things."

"Your brother said the other morning that it was teeth." Virginia laughed, and showed her own excellent ones. "He called them a useful invention of Providence, which kept your mind off other things."

"Well, Mrs. Young's teeth would depress anybody—even Frank."

"He asked me if I would go down to that settlement of his in Whitechapel some Tuesday or Friday evening. Is there anything I can do there?"

"Eve—Mrs. Frank—would say there wasn't."

"She did. She was there when Mr. Norman asked me. She came in to pick him up. . . . She said they were young hooligans and quite beyond her. I can't believe anything was

ever really beyond Mrs. Frank."

"She does give you that idea. But boys are not her strong suit, I fancy. . . . What do *you* imagine you can do down there?"

"I hadn't thought. Mr. Norman heard me telling the children a story the other day and thought I could do that."

"What story were you telling them?"

"The story of Etàin in Fairyland."

"That doesn't seem a very suitable story for the boys of the Hawes Settlement."

"No. But there are lots of other stories in that cycle. It's Celtic mythology, you know."

"Oh," said Maud Norman, "Deirdre, King Cuchulain and all that, isn't it? How do you come to know things of that kind? They were certainly left out of my education."

"You weren't dependent upon books as I was, when you were young."

"Did you find out this Celtic stuff for yourself?"

"No. . . . Somebody I knew gave me a book about it. I found it exciting and then I read Ossian and the Percy Reliques. So the other day when I wanted some new stories for the crèche children I suddenly thought of them all again. That's all. It just happened, I suppose, that Mr. Norman knew them, too."

"I see. Well, I don't see why Frank's boys shouldn't find them interesting. It's worth trying—and I don't suppose you'd find them such hooligans as Eve did. They'd trot out all the hooliganism they'd got for her. Eve's like that."

"She's a very fine type of woman, I think. . . ."

"Oh, lord, yes—as fine as you like—but the young male creature doesn't appreciate that—especially the young *slum* male creature. Did Mrs. Norman ask you if you were going to join her Suffrage Society?"

"The Women's Social and Political Union? Yes."

"And are you going to?"

"I've not really thought. Are you?"

"No—I never do join things. And politicians make me angry."

"But you do think women ought to have the vote?"

"As a matter of abstract justice, of course, since the only people who haven't votes besides women are children and idiots."

"Do you agree with Mrs. MacLaren, then? She thinks it's the system—that unless we alter that we're patching a rotten garment."

"What we've got to alter is the human heart, by which, as your friend Wordsworth says, we live. You won't do anything with this world until you can develop a social conscience for it. And that's going to take whole æons of time."

"But women can *help*. . . ."

"Lord, yes, and if the suffrage people can help women—the women we have here—to get up a little independence and self-respect, all glory to it. But this W.S.P.U.'s going to be a moneyed affair—and the women who want the vote most are the women who haven't any money. Or hasn't that struck you?"

"Yes," said Virginia, "it has," and was quiet, mentally turning over a truth that presented itself afresh to her every morning now of her life.

"Well, I'm off," said Maud Norman. "I shall be keeping that woman who's coming to see me at seven."

"Shall I tell them to get you a cab?"

"I've got my bike."

"You can't go home on that—you'll get drenched. It's pouring with rain."

"No, I'll do it. You go and put your feet up. And go to bed early. You look tired."

After Maud had gone, Virginia went upstairs to her own room, ate the meal put before her, sat for a while over the book which had just arrived for her from Mudie's, then put it down and stood running her eye over her bookshelves. *The Happy Hypocrite*, *The Path to Rome*, *Isabel Carnaby*, *Last Summer*, *The Prophet of Berkeley Square*, *Sister Teresa*, *Esther Waters*, *Twelve Years in a Monastery*; *Celtic Myths and Legends*. She put out a hand and took that down, turned to the front page, saw, as she knew she would, the spidery ups and downs of a handwriting which once had made her nerves quiver, "To Virginia, who likes them. May, 1899. From S.R.," and sat there turning over its pages and remembering how once its stories had seemed to hold all the magic in the world. Etain the Fair, who belonged to the fairies, who, reincarnated, had married Eochy, the High King of Ireland, and who heard the faery song and knew she must go back to her Danaan husband Midir. . . .

O fair-haired woman, will you come with me to the marvellous land, full of Music, where the hair is primrose yellow and the body white as snow?

There none speaks of "mine" or "thine" . . .

She turned the pages quickly and came to the story of Lugh the Protector, the rousing of Ulster, the death of Cuchulain. *Was there, perhaps, a story here for Frank Norman's boys?* If so, to-night at least it eluded her. She put the book back upon the shelf, sat down and wrote out a list of likely books which came running into her mind. Some stories by Evelyn Nesbitt; *Treasure Island*, *Wind in the Willows* and *The Little White Bird*, which she had read a month or two ago. She slipped the list into her handbag and made a mental note to walk down Oxford Street as far as Bumpus's bookshop on the morrow and secure them. One of the joys of life was going from now on to be the buying of the numerous books one continually wanted.

She spent the evening over her chosen volumes when she had them, and they so delighted her that she sat down at once and wrote to Frank Norman.

"DEAR MR. NORMAN,—I've been thinking over your suggestion that I might tell or read some stories one evening to your boys at the Hawes Settlement. I don't feel—yet—very sure about the Celtic legends (they won't like Etain and the fairies and *ought* they to like quite so much fighting as there is in the other parts?), but I've been looking at some of Miss (or is it Mrs.?) Nesbitt's stories and I think I could do something with them. And with *Treasure Island* and its map and all that about Stevenson having written it for a boy of his own; and I thought, too, perhaps, with *The Little White Bird* of Mr. Barrie. Perhaps you would let me know what you think—and tell me any other likely books that occur to you.

"Yours very sincerely,

"VIRGINIA BRODIE."

To which Frank promptly replied:

"DEAR MISS BRODIE,—I am quite sure *any* story *you* tell, the boys will love. You are a born story-teller. It's a great gift. Suppose we say Friday week?"

III

Those Friday evenings became a thing to which Virginia looked forward with intense joy after that initial evening, when her heart had thumped for the first quarter of an hour so that she could scarcely get out a word. The boys—quiet whilst Frank had introduced her to them—began to regard her appearance there and its reason as a very good joke indeed when he had gone out. But Virginia stuck to it and to them and in a short while the room was quiet. Frank, coming back in half an hour, smiled as he came in and took a seat at the back for a moment or two.

"She's 'got' them," he thought. "I always believed she would."

She was telling them some stories out of Fabre, and the one in the middle of which he had entered was an account of that heartless creature, the Praying Mantis. He had not read Fabre and he did not know how much of Fabre she was using or how much her bright and witty account of Madame Mantis was her own embroidery upon his frame. But of the story's success there could be no doubt.

Frank sat still until it was finished, then rose and said he thought they'd worked her hard enough for one evening, but that perhaps, if they would like it, she might be persuaded to come some other evening. Then he carried her off for coffee and sandwiches and took her from room to room, enlisting her sympathy and interest.

They had an adventurous journey home which constituted Virginia's first essay in motoring. The owner of the car, Bob Craddock, was a young man who, Frank said, was "machine-mad" and who, if you encouraged him even a little, would tell you all about the combustion engine and draw diagrams illustrating its workings for you. Virginia, very shy these days with young men and not used to them, did not encourage him even ever so little. She climbed into the car at Frank's side, settled the rug over her knees and prepared to hold on her hat. It seemed, she thought, a somewhat uncomfortable way of travelling. Above the din and rattle Frank said to her:

"Does all this depress you?"

"London?"

"This sort of London, I mean—London's slums."

"It would, I suppose, if I let it. But one *daren't* be depressed."

"You mean that once you start you'd never, in this world, be anything else?"

"Do I?"

They turned their heads and smiled at each other.

"Well . . . it isn't *only* the slums, is it . . . and getting depressed doesn't help."

"I know. All the same, you don't look, somehow, as if social reform was your work at all."

"Oh—why?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you why. Perhaps it's your youth, and your vitality. You look as though life's . . . unsatisfactorinesses, life's miseries would go clean over you. And you're not a town type. I should have thought you could be happy only in the country."

"But the country isn't all that it looks, you know. I *do* like the country—to look at. I miss that side of it quite a lot. But I wasn't happy in the country, so that's really rather generous of me. It's only human to dislike the places where you've been miserable, isn't it?"

"My wife would agree with you. But she *hates* the country and is quite sure she was very miserable in it. It was lovely country, too—Clutton, in Shropshire. Do you know it?"

Her heart beat a little quickly as she said:

"Yes. I stayed . . . once . . . at Huish Priors."

"Did you? Did you, really? Isn't it a jolly place? Maud and I spent a summer there one year. I was doing locum over at Clutton. I used to go into Clunbury once a week. It was there I first met my wife. She came to have a tooth stopped. It annoyed her no end."

Virginia said: "Does Mrs. Norman come from Clutton?"

"Clunbury, which is near enough. Her father was old Jeremy Bentley. If you stayed much at Huish you probably heard of him. He was quite famous in his day and generation as a pioneer. He believed the steam-engine was going to make us a self-supporting nation. But the clay soils of England gave more trouble than he expected."

A shutter moved back somewhere in Virginia's brain. A dinner-table in that old room at Huish Priors and she sitting at it, and Richard, and the talk turning upon Jeremy Bentley and his daughters. Beth, the one who ran off with a married man. Mary . . . What had happened to Mary? And Eve, who'd

wanted to be a doctor . . . Eve had married this nice man—Maud Norman's brother.

The shutter snapped to again.

"I did hear about him," she said. "A pioneer in the 'fifties."

"Only for farming. Not women. That was Eve's trouble. He didn't care for her extension of his ideas."

Something happened at this juncture to the car. It stopped dead in the middle of the road and the young man in the driver's seat got down and pulled violently on the handle in front. For a little nothing happened, then there was a terrific, deafening roar and the young man stepped hastily back and climbed again into his place.

"Stopped the engine," he said casually over his shoulder. "All right now."

The noise subsided and they went on again, fairly fast too, for the "speed limit" had only recently been abolished.

"It's as bad as trying to talk in the new tube," Frank said as they rattled and vibrated along.

"It does seem rather noisy," Virginia agreed.

"We're in for an age of noise, I'm afraid," Frank told her. "Noise and speed. We're coming to an age of machinery and I'm not quite sure that the idea entirely appeals to me. It'll be all right for the next generation; they'll either be born into all this noise or grow up with it. But I confess I find it rather nerve-shattering."

Virginia smiled. She did not seem to mind the noise and she was grateful to the special burst of it which had put an end to that conversation about Huish. She hadn't wanted to talk of it, she didn't know why: it didn't matter any longer, but it just was one of the things she wanted to forget—one of the things which, with so much else, she might, in time, persuade herself had never happened at all.

"How much does this car do?" she inquired.

"What it would take forty horses to do. That's what it's capable of doing. Luckily our young man isn't letting himself go to-night. Do you find it cold?"

"A little, but my hat's the trouble. It's much too big for this kind of thing."

"Take it off."

"Then my hair would blow down. I wish I had the courage to follow your sister's example and cut it off."

"I wonder more women haven't followed it. They will some day."

"Do you think they will?"

"Yes, when they begin to be employed—to find jobs. And they'll shorten their skirts, too. It's all a part of feminine emancipation—and of this mechanical age we're heading for. That'll be *one* thing in its favour, anyway."

"You think women's clothes are ugly?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"Yes . . . but so are men's."

"At least ours is utilitarian. It's an improvement upon the lace and ruffles of the eighteenth century. They must have been awful—and fancy having to wear a sword! But I don't suppose you'll agree with me. You're still at the romantic age."

"Oh no," Virginia heard herself saying with unnecessary emphasis. "Oh no, I'm *miles* past that. There isn't *anything* romantic about *me* at all."

"Oh, I hope there is," said Frank, and he too thought he said that with more emphasis than was strictly necessary.

He was aware that in the darkness Virginia turned her head and looked at him as if she wondered why.

"We're nearly home," he said, "provided our chauffeur doesn't stop his engine again. I'm always so certain that he'll never get it going again. I hope you'll come some other Friday, will you?"

"Of course, I'd love to. If you think they'll like me a second time."

"I'm sure they'll like you any number of times."

"I was very much afraid they'd be very bored with me, you know. I believe everybody thought so, too—except you."

"Did they? Well, they were all wrong, weren't they? Shall we fix Friday week definitely?"

"Why not *next* Friday?"

"I can't monopolize you every week. You're young and ought to go out and enjoy yourself."

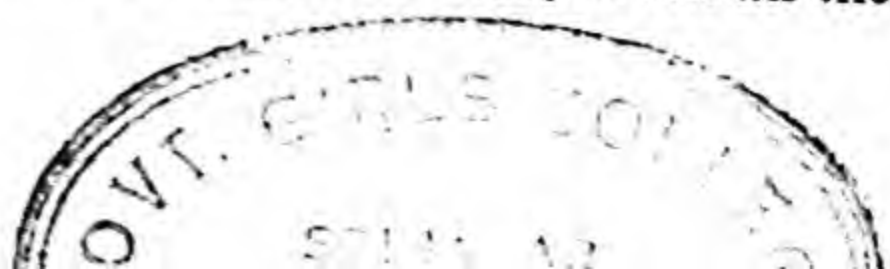
"I *have* enjoyed myself."

"You really do like doing this?"

"Immensely."

"Well, I'm glad of that; but we'll make it Friday week all the same, on principle."

Virginia laughed.



"You *are* stubborn, aren't you?" she said.

He only laughed. Virginia turned her head and looked at his thin, beautifully-modelled face, his shabby suit and the tie that didn't go with it and remembered, inconsequently, Eve Norman's appearance—the trim costume that was always spoiled by the ugly hat. And she smiled to herself at the recollection. People who wanted to do things obviously had no time to bother over-much about clothes, and Virginia, who cared for them quite absurdly, had a sudden rush of inferiority. Queer how the people who had disapproved of her could never make her feel that way; how that sneaking contempt she felt still sometimes for herself was invariably aroused by the people she admired and who liked and approved (who at least did not disapprove) of her. John and Sylvia Shelley, Maud and Frank Norman, and, in a lesser degree, his wife, Eve, of whom so far, however, she had not seen a great deal. But Eve, at Stephanie House, was already something of a legend.

The car took a corner swiftly and sent her hurtling against Frank's shoulder as he said:

"Oh, good, we've actually arrived—here's my road. I leave you here—I hope nothing will happen between this spot and Stephanie House."

Nothing did. The young man who owned the car got down, opened the door for her and stood before her beaming with pride.

"Nice little 'bus, isn't she?" he asked.

"Very. . . . What sort of a car is it?"

"She's a Benz. Pretty smart, isn't she?"

"A Benz?" Virginia repeated politely.

"After Carl Benz, you know, the father of the motor-car. Carl Benz of Mannheim. . . ."

"Oh, I see," said Virginia politely. And then: "Good night and thank you."

"Good night—good night." The young man gripped her hand, grinned, and climbed back into his car.

IV

Virginia went sometimes to tea with the young Normans, for that was what it amounted to, for Eve Norman sat on Committees, went back to Stephanie House to help dispense on busy days, and was involved in this new society committed to the

wresting of Votes for Women from the Government of the day. Her children took her absences for granted—even the baby, Judy—and nobody could say they were neglected. Virginia found them the most charming of children, and their mother's capacity for taking in anything and everything was amazing. All the same, Virginia marvelled sometimes at her cool level-headedness, wondered if she could ever attain to that calm serenity with which she made wifehood and motherhood just part of the general scheme of life, a *motif* in a full and intricate design. She had more energy and vitality than anybody Virginia had ever encountered: she was never hurried or flurried: she had time for everything and everybody, but intimacy was not a thing you might look for in your relationship with Eve Norman. Friendliness, generosity, kindness, consideration, thoughtfulness—she gave you these. She gave them in good measure to Virginia, but intimacy was another matter. "I'm just one of lots of people Fate has thrown across her path," Virginia thought, "and if I disappeared to-morrow she'd just forget all about me."

So Virginia came to Marne House to tea and deepened her acquaintance with Eve Norman's children; with Mark, nine at this time and obviously a little embarrassed by his mother's franchise activities, so that Virginia was continually amused by the little air of detachment from these things which he carried about with him; with Mona, the lovely child whose photograph as a baby adorned her aunt's room at the clinic, and to whom Virginia felt a complete victim, for her charms were both marked and numerous, even at the age of seven; and with the good-tempered baby, Judith, to whom her heart opened like a flower. From the bottom of it she envied Eve Norman her children.

Sometimes Frank Norman came in and shared the nursery tea, and Virginia would wonder how Eve could bear to be absent, would marvel at the cool, undisturbed way in which she would perhaps come in presently, when tea was done. Virginia would think: She's marvellous, she really is. Almost any other woman couldn't help feeling just a little bit jealous and making me feel an intruder. She's the least possessive creature in all the world.

Virginia met old Jeremy Bentley once or twice at Marne House and was struck with the hostility between him and his daughter. She feels about him as I used to feel about Aunt Frances, Virginia thought, as somebody who's got in the way, pushed things out of shape; but she was aware that old Bentley

had taken a fancy to her.

"You at the clinic, too? Sakes alive!" he exclaimed. "I should have thought you'd have wanted babies of your own. No young men in the offing, yet—eh?"

"No," said Virginia. "Besides, I like my work at the clinic."

"Maybe, maybe, my dear. I'm not saying it isn't good work—useful, too. But you're not the sort to waste your time on other women's children. I should have thought you'd have had dozens of young men. . . . Probably, have, too—though you won't say."

"No, truly. . . ."

"Then I don't know what's the matter with the modern young men," said Jeremy. "No eyes in their head, I should say."

Virginia blushed. It was not the only time he made her blush on the same subject. But, too, though he was far from knowing it, he made her heart ache a little, for he confirmed in her a belief that had sat in her heart awaiting acknowledgment ever since she began to go to the Norman nursery for tea, that this work to which she applied herself with so much zeal was, for her, but second best. She was no Maud Norman, no Eve Bentley. She wanted, more than anything else in the world, a home of her own and children. Left to herself, however, she could go on refusing to make this acknowledgment, for the work she did was worth while and it interested her. Life was not empty—far from it; but every time she had tea with the young Normans, or went to see Sylvia Shelley and her little son, it seemed to her that it had a rent in it. Second-best, second-best. That was what she had been forced to take out of life. It was interesting and good, but it would never cease to be that for her.

She came to avoid Marne House, when she knew that Jeremy Bentley was going to be there. But that, as it happened, was not often, for Eve Norman had obviously no love for her father and did not encourage his visits. She thought he spoiled Mona, and Virginia knew that it annoyed her when he laughed at her laments regarding Mona's boredom with certain of her studies, like arithmetic. "What use will arithmetic be to her," he demanded, "except to help her keep stock of her lovers?" And, perhaps, it was just as well that Virginia was not there to hear the parallel he drew between her and the beautiful Mona.

"You're not going to make any short-haired woman doctor of *that* child, my girl—so don't you imagine it. She's like that girl

Maud's got hold of—made for marriage. I'll bet you five pounds Maud doesn't keep *her* long. Another year at the outside."

"Thank you. I've something better to do with my five pounds," Eve Norman said. "You've got marriage on the brain. But I won't have you filling my daughters' heads with it. As for Miss Brodie, I understand she had a love affair that went wrong—so probably, once bit, twice shy."

"Don't you believe it, my dear," said Jeremy Bentley. "You'd better pin your hopes on Judy, my girl. She's yourself all over again."

"Judy! She's a baby! What nonsense you talk."

"You wait and see. But anyway, a woman who prefers an M.A. to an M.A.N. has something the matter with her."

Eve Norman didn't laugh. She bit her lip on an old recollection—an echo of her long ago reading. *When a woman has scholarly inclinations there is generally something wrong with her sexual nature.*

"You're paraphrasing Nietzsche, father," she said.

"Eh?" said the old man, who was growing deaf but was always deafer with Eve than with anyone else. "Speak up, my girl. Paraphrasing who?"

"Nietzsche—Friedrich Nietzsche—a German philosopher. He didn't like Christianity or women, and he died in a mad-house."

"I don't understand a word you're saying, my girl."

"You never did, father."

"Eh? What say, what say?"

"Nothing," said Eve. "Nothing that matters."

As she gathered up her belongings and prepared to take her departure she looked at the old man in his chair. He was seventy-seven, and yet there were times when she hated him now as she had hated him as a girl when he had ignored her talents and stood in her path. And sometimes she hated all men because of him. But as though that was a thought which disturbed her a little she finished with her belongings and hurried away.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

DURING the next two years whilst Russia and Japan flew at each other's throats and the first motor-buses made their appearance on the London streets, Virginia continued her visits to Whitechapel, made the acquaintance of two men who were occasional visitors there and received a proposal from the owner of the Benz, who had got rather into the habit of calling for her and driving her down through the crowded streets from Bayswater to Whitechapel. He was an enthusiastic young man, who cared for his new combustion engine more than he cared for anything else in the world; but was inclined in his less occupied moments to hold Virginia's hand and utter awkward but obviously sincere compliments. These things made Virginia nervous, for the driving of this new and rapid locomotive called, she thought, for the entire concentration of the driver, and the journeys from Notting Hill to Whitechapel came to be something in the nature of fearful joys. All the same, she wondered sometimes if she would have accepted him if he had not chosen to propose to her whilst driving through the traffic of Oxford Street on a wet and misty night. She knew by now that marriages were undertaken for many things other than love: and though that was an emotion she had long ago made up her mind she would never feel again, she found it difficult to believe that even the most business-like marriage could be undertaken with one to whose hand-holdings one reacted so unhappily.

The immediate result of this *contretemps* was that the Benz and its owner disappeared from the Whitechapel scene and Frank Norman, who had known for some time how the wind blew, teased her a little. And then God, as he said, sent him Theodore Mostyn.

He drifted in somehow on a night when Virginia had succumbed to a violent headache against which she had been wrestling all day, and he had delighted her class by doing amusing lightning sketches on the blackboard. After that evening she met him casually at the Settlement and knew that Frank Norman considered him "a find," but did not have any personal

conversation with him until after a dinner-party at Marne House to which Eve Norman had invited them both. Virginia had not been unaware of the antagonism which swept across the table from Eve to Mostyn. Gaunt, careless about his clothes, and "anti" all the things she cared about, he was only too obviously merely another example of Frank's weakness for the halt and the blind. All the same, the references to these facts to which Mostyn treated Virginia an evening or so later surprised her, and disconcerted her, too, as though for some reason or other he was anxious she should not waste any unnecessary sympathy on him.

"Oh, Mrs. Norman's instinct's right, of course," he said. "I *am* no good. She thinks my type's superfluous—and she's right there, too, of course. If she knew the truth about me, I doubt if she'd ever let me spend another hour with those charming youngsters of hers."

"Oh, why do you say that? Mrs. Norman isn't bigoted?"

"No, but she takes an intelligent interest in the welfare of the human race. She wouldn't consider me a good influence on the growing generation. Right again—probably."

"I'm quite sure you do her an injustice. Mrs. Norman is uncompromising and very downright. More than anybody I've ever met she knows what she wants, but she isn't harsh or hard. She does things and says things sometimes, to hide the fact that other things have hurt her."

"You like her, do you?"

"Yes, and I admire her, too. She's a very fine type of woman. I wish I were like her."

"God forbid!"

His tone was so hearty that Virginia laughed aloud.

"No, you really are unfair. If the world was full of Mrs. Normans we'd get on much better."

"*You* might. But what a world it would be—an ant-like society, highly organized, terribly efficient, with no place in it for people like me—who've made a success of nothing and a failure of most things, including marriage."

"Oh, if your objection to Mrs. Norman's world is that you wouldn't be very comfortable in it . . ."

"Comfortable? I'd never have a chance to be comfortable or uncomfortable—I'd never get in. I'd be introduced to the lethal chamber. Do you think Mrs. Norman's the sort of woman

who'd have any use whatsoever for a faithless husband—for an adulterer?"

The harsh word struck incongruously upon the lovely night of stars, that shone over the Bayswater Road and twinkled amid the tree-tops in Kensington Gardens. Virginia, utterly taken by surprise, found herself bereft of words. But Theodore Mostyn did not seem to expect an answer. He went on:

"I married a woman I'd have gone to Hell for—in the face of the opposition of her ultra-respectable family, who didn't like me at sight and never had any reason subsequently to think any better of me. We made a mess of it from the first and presently the inevitable happened. I had an affair with a girl at the office—a decent enough girl, but the thing didn't mean anything to either of us. It was virtually over when my wife found out. She couldn't get a divorce, but she left me, taking the boy with her. She had a small income of her own and her family helped. I never saw the boy again until after her death, a year ago."

"Ah, that was cruel!" broke from Virginia. "Your own child!"

"She didn't consider I was fit to have anything to do with him, you see. What I had done was beyond excuse. Nothing I could ever have said or done would have atoned. She would have died rather than have had anything more to do with me. In fact, she did."

"And what about the boy?"

"He's shy with me, but rather nice, I think. Come over to see him when the holidays begin. That is, if you feel you can, after hearing my history."

"I'd like to, some day, if I can fit it in. . . . What's your little boy's name?"

"Shane. It was his mother's idea. Goodness knows where she got it from."

The talk of Shane Mostyn led them naturally to Frank's boys at the Settlement in Whitechapel and for some reason she did not stay to analyse, Virginia kept the conversation along these lines the rest of the way to the station, where their homeward ways divided.

II

Virginia went across at Easter, nineteen-five, to the ugly rooms in which Mostyn lived and to which his young son had come to

spend his holidays, to have her gentle heart ravished with pity for him. He was a charming boy, rather shy, and somewhere about young Mark Norman's age, which seemed, in Virginia's mind, to stress the difference between the lives of the two boys. But when she said this to Eve Norman she was told that there was no reason why Mostyn should continue to live at Forest Gate.

"He went there when it all happened and he's the kind of person who stays in one place because it's too much trouble to move."

"But isn't he very poor?"

"No—not wretchedly so. He's got a job in one of the advertising studios. Of course he despises the work and everybody there, but it isn't badly paid and Frank says they think well of what he does there, for all his own contempt of it. He could take that boy out into the open suburbs or the near country if he'd trouble to bestir himself—but he won't. You're wasting your sympathy, Virginia. Restrict it to Maud's babies and to my husband's slum boys."

Virginia thought a little wistfully how nice it must be to be as sure as Eve Norman was about her conclusions.

"I'm sorry for Shane," she said. "I can't get him out of my mind. You see, I had a dull childhood myself."

"Oh, so did I," said Eve. "Nobody more so. But I don't see how you're going to do anything with the Theodore Mostyns of the world. They're quite hopeless."

"It's queer how children like him."

"My children, you mean? I know. But my children would like the devil if he came among them and was amusing and let them do the things they liked best to do."

Virginia saw the little frown on Eve Norman's face, and was reminded of Mostyn's complaint that Eve did not approve of the encouragement he gave to her small daughter's artistic talent, that it annoyed her to hear him confirm her husband's contention that Mona could draw. Eve Norman, he had told her, did not trust the artistic professions—nor those who practised them—and she would not readily believe that she had produced a child who wanted to belong to one of them.

"You can't prove anything," said Eve Norman now, "by children"; but Virginia, thinking that perhaps it was truer to say you could prove too much, made no reply, for just then the door opened and Mona came into the room and her mind filled, as

always at the mere sight of her, with the thought of her quite unusual beauty.

Monica Norman at this time had just passed her tenth birthday. She had a pale skin, the colour of cream, enormous eyes, set unusually far apart and very fair hair that lay across her forehead in long soft waves. And it wasn't only her face—everything about her was beautiful, the delicately modelled, small-boned body, her voice and her every movement. She was like a wave of the sea, Virginia thought as she looked at her, and again she experienced that sense of emptiness and loss that assailed her so frequently when in the bosom of the Norman family.

"What is it, Mona?" inquired Eve.

"Mummy—*could* you just spare a minute? . . . I've got such a *stupid* General Knowledge paper and daddy's just called through the door that he's got *dozens* of teeth still to take out. . . ."

"Darling, don't you see Miss Brodie?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Miss Brodie. How do you do?"

"Well, darling? What is it you want to know?"

"I thought perhaps you'd know why it's called 'Pall Mall.'"

"The road, you mean, by St. James's Palace?"

"Yes."

"But, Mona, you ought to hunt these things up, if you don't know. That's the way to impress them upon your mind. That's the *idea* of a General Knowledge paper."

"Yes . . . I know. I *have* tried the Encyclopædia, but it doesn't say."

Eve said: "I'm rather busy now, Mona, but I'll see what I can do to help you later on. . . ."

"You won't *forget*?"

"I'll try not."

Virginia smiled. She had observed, as had the child, that Eve had not admitted she did not know; both suspected that she would take the first opportunity of looking it up, and both tried to look as if they were not aware of it.

"I suppose," said Mona, as one without hope, "*you* don't know, Miss Brodie?"

"As a matter of fact," said Virginia, "I believe I do—as it happens. Isn't it called after the game *palle malle* which one of the Stuart Kings used to play, with his Court, there? Charles

the Second, it was, I *think*, but I wouldn't be sure of that."

Mona was delighted with this unexpected and quite accidental piece of knowledge on Virginia's part.

"Good heavens! Fancy *anybody* knowing," she cried. "How *did* you?"

"Somebody told me years ago—somebody who had more general knowledge than anybody I've ever met since. And it just happened, I suppose, to stick."

"Oh, *thank* you," said Mona, "thanks *awfully*," and went.

Then her mother said how extraordinary it was what stuff they filled the child mind with at school and extraordinary the things one remembered and forgot, and poured out more tea for Virginia, who, however, said nothing. Her mind had swung back to that wet November afternoon as she and Stacey had walked down the Mall, and because she had been afraid to talk of the war since she could only think of things to say that made Stacey angry, she had asked that idle passing question: "Pall Mall! What a queer name! Why do they call it that?"

III

The third man, Charles Frome, she met some months later at a dinner-party of Sylvia Shelley's, one sweet Spring evening in May, nineteen-six. Frome had a strong brown face, a pair of keen black eyes, and thick silky hair, also black and so luxuriant as to attract attention. Sylvia had introduced him as "Professor Frome," but Virginia, who thought all professors were old and frowsty and bald, felt there must be some mistake. But though she caught his dark eyes upon her once or twice during the meal, he did not talk to her. It was not only that they were not seated very near each other: he gave Virginia the impression that he thought dining-out rather a bore, but she, seated beside Frank Norman, was aware that it didn't matter who failed to talk to her.

"Professor of what?" she whispered to him.

"Literature," said Frank.

"Oh," said Virginia, vaguely relieved, and Frank smiled at the tone of her voice and pushed the olives towards her. "Have one of these," he said. "You'd find Frome interesting to talk to, once you got him going."

"Oh, but I'm sure I never could."

"Why not?"

"I don't know—he doesn't look easy. Not to women, anyhow."

"No? But look how excellently he and my wife are getting on together."

"Eve, yes, that's different."

"Is it?"

"Well, he'd *have* to approve of her."

"You think he doesn't—of women generally?"

"No; do you?"

"I think you're a very wise little person. How did you learn it all?"

"I? Wise? I know nothing, nothing! I've done everything wrong all my life."

She was astonished at the sudden passion in her voice and was grateful to Frank for pretending not to notice it.

"Have another olive," he said, "they're good, these little French ones. We nearly always have to put up with the Spanish—not half so good."

Virginia, munching her olive, turned her head and smiled at him and thought suddenly how good a thing a dinner-party was and wished that this one might go on for ever.

"Do you think they're talking books?" she asked him.

"Frome and Eve? Most unlikely, I should say, unless they're engaged in slanging the modern novel."

"Don't they like novels?"

"My wife doesn't. Too much love, she says, and no knowledge of that very useful little word, 'work.'"

"I know lots of novels that haven't any 'love.'"

"Lots? Be careful now. That's a rash statement."

"Well, there's *The Ebb Tide*, rather old, by Stevenson, and *The Magnetic North*, very new, by Elizabeth Robins."

"True, O King! What else?"

"Well, you wouldn't say that a book like *Voysey* was 'all about love,' now would you?"

"I'm afraid I haven't read *Voysey*. Who wrote it?"

"Somebody called 'R. O. Prowse'—it's a man, I'm afraid."

"Good. I must read it. But it isn't a very long list, you know. You'll have to do a little research work on the subject. Meantime, play for safety. Talk to Frome about your Celtic myths. He'll appreciate them."

After dinner he took her up to the Professor and performed a second introduction.

"This is Virginia Brodie—a young woman with interests up your street," he said, and went away and left them. Virginia, sinking into the seat at Frome's side, wondered why she felt as if she had been deserted.

In those first few seconds Charles Frome looked at her so straightly that the colour faintly deepened in her cheeks. She felt a fool. She didn't know why. Did he mean her to feel like that? He looked—sort of indifferent, a little bored still and not very hopeful—perhaps about her as a conversationalist. She said:

"But we needn't *talk* about books, if you're tired of them. I mean, if you've been talking books all through dinner with Mrs. Norman."

"I haven't . . ."

"Oh, I see. Well—all right."

"Mrs. Norman doesn't talk books to anyone, does she?"

"I don't know—not to me." Suddenly Virginia laughed.

"Did she ask you why you didn't join the W.S.P.U.?"

"No—probably because she knows."

"Oh," said Virginia, and thought sternly: "No, you won't catch me here. I won't say: 'Oh, then you don't think women ought to have votes?' What does it matter what he thinks, any way?" She said instead:

"I don't suppose that would stop her—if she really wanted to know."

Frome laughed.

"No," he said, "I don't suppose it would. You like Mrs. Norman very much, don't you?"

"Oh yes—and Sylvia Shelley, too."

"Oh, Sylvia Shelley! . . ."

No need to pursue that topic. He looked, Virginia thought, enthusiastic for the first time that evening, and his eyes turned to that part of the room where Sylvia sat listening to the conversation going on around her and saying scarcely anything at all, but glancing every now and then at her husband's face and smiling as though what he said pleased her infinitely.

"Ever go down to Norman's Settlement?"

"Yes. Often."

"What do you do down there?"

"I read to them—and tell them stories."

"Other people's stories?"

"Mostly. . . . And recently I've started a French class."

"You know French well?"

"Not very, I think, but well enough for a class of beginners. I worked at it once, years ago, when I was at a loose end."

"It's not very often, is it, that people think of filling in time by improving their minds?"

(She thought: "People? He means *women*, of course." . . .)

"What sort of stories do you read to Frank Norman's boys?"

"I started with Fabre. Originally I meant to dig out something from a book of Celtic myths."

"Celtic myths? Who put you on to those?"

The imp in her mind did it again. He means: *What man?* Men were always surprised when women knew things—how to throw or catch a ball, or how to get on or off a 'bus whilst it was moving. And her knowledge of books had surprised everybody who had ever troubled to notice it, save Frank Norman, who had quietly accepted her interest in the unusual in literature as something innately her own, and her knowledge of it as something sprung out of it. And though it wasn't strictly true, in her case, she found the mental attitude strangely refreshing.

But Charles Frome had to be answered, and answered truthfully. She didn't know why. Suppose she said, just casually: "Oh, I stumbled across them, you know, the way one does!"

She didn't. She said: "A man I knew years ago lent me the volume."

"I see. What else do you read besides Fabre and the Celtic myths?"

She ran off a list of the first names that entered her mind.

"McCabe, George Moore, Hilaire Belloc, Elizabeth Robins, John Galsworthy, George Bernard Shaw, Olive Schreiner, Richard Jefferies . . ."

"No poetry?"

"Oh yes. Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth . . ."

"Only the Romantics?"

"No, not *only*—and I don't call Wordsworth exactly romantic."

"Neither is he, perhaps, in your sense; but he belongs to the Romantic Revival in literature, all the same."

Her face fell. How ignorant she was! She knew nothing—that mattered. Chance items of information she'd pick up or read in books, like that scrap about the origin of "Pall Mall," but no sustained and ordered knowledge belonged to her. This man, a scholar, must think her a pretentious fool, and though she tried to console herself by thinking that it didn't matter, anyway, *what* he thought of her, she was aware that she did not like being thought any kind of a fool by anybody at all and certainly not by Charles Frome.

"Tell me," he said, "have you really *read* Wordsworth—or have you met him in anthologies?"

"Oh no. I've read lots of him. Not only the short poems, but things like *The Prelude*."

"And did you like it?"

"Some of it. But it isn't all poetry, *is it?*"

"No, I'm afraid it isn't, though I fancy Wordsworth wouldn't have agreed with us."

Her heart warmed to him for that friendly "us."

"Don't you care for the modern poets? Swinburne, for example—or Rossetti, or Hardy, perhaps? Or William Butler Yeats?"

"Not so well, I think. I don't seem to remember them so well, either. They don't say things you remember for ever, somehow, like the others do."

"I know—like Keats' 'faery seas forlorn,' you mean?"

"Yes, and his *Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips, bidding farewell*."

Charles Frome looked at her as if he wondered why anybody as young as herself should accept this line as an embodiment of a human truth.

"What is it you think they lack?"

"I don't know. They've less magic, haven't they?"

Frome nodded his dark head and smiled at her as if he considered her opinion worth listening to—or as if he didn't. And once again, for no definite reason, the colour came up into her face and she felt self-conscious and a little foolish.

"Did you find Frank Norman's boys appreciated your legends and insect stories?"

"They seemed to. I don't think they've been bored—or they'd begin to get noisy and rowdy, wouldn't they?"

"And they haven't done that?"

"Not so far," she laughed. "I don't know what I'd do if they did."

"You like boys?"

"Not specially—I mean not more than girls. I think Eve Norman's two girls adorable, but mostly I think I like *poor* children, like those at the Settlement and at Stephanie House."

"Oh, you're at Stephanie House, are you?"

"Yes. But I'm not anything . . . I mean I know nothing about nursing or medicine. I keep the books and see the patients, and find out things about them. And I help with the babies."

The sound of Frank Norman laughing at something somebody had said sent her eyes and attention to that end of the room. She did not hear what Charles Frome said: she felt isolated again—lost and out of things. Getting up, she said suddenly: "It's very late, I'm afraid. I must go. Good-bye . . . it's been awfully interesting." She shook hands and went away towards that little gay group across the room. The way it opened to receive her warmed her heart.

"It's been so nice," she said to Sylvia. "I wish it weren't so late."

"You'd better wait for us," Eve Norman said. "We're just coming. Or aren't we, Frank?"

"Yes, in a moment," said Frank. "I must just have a word with Frome."

Sylvia said softly to Virginia:

"Why didn't you come to tea on Friday? You half-promised."

"I know, but the afternoon just flew. Three women had to have some teeth out. They made rather a fuss, poor things."

She knew why the afternoon flew, and Sylvia looked as though she knew too. After the extractions Frank Norman would have to be given tea. Sylvia said:

"Oh, it didn't matter, only I wanted to tell you about Michael's sister."

Virginia's face lightened up.

"Oh, Sylvia—*when*?"

"Christmas."

"Oh, I *am* glad."

"So are we," said Sylvia, and her eyes rested on the back of her husband's head with that infinitely pleased and satisfied expression.

"I wouldn't be glad about having it at Christmas, all the same," said Eve Norman, with a little laugh.

"Oh, why not, Eve? I thought I'd been most opportune. Christmas is most suitable. Why, every Christmas will be really *hers*."

"Or his," said Eve, still laughing.

"Oh, Eve, don't, you contrary creature!"

Eve was still laughing when Frank came up.

"Take her home, Frank, do; she's spoiling my arrangements with Fate."

"It's the result of my converse with Charles Frome," Eve said. "He makes me contradictory. It's your own fault, Sylvia; you shouldn't sit him down beside me at dinner."

"Oh, Eve, you *know* you enjoyed it. He's a delightful creature. Don't you think so, Virginia?"

"I don't know." Virginia laughed. "I suppose he is, but I think I see why Eve wants to contradict him."

"There you are!" said Eve Norman, and moved away to "hurry Frank up."

In the taxi that took them the short distance from Bryanston Square to Marne House the subject of Charles Frome came up again, and it was Frank this time who thought he was "such a charming creature" and who said: "Don't you think so, Virginia?"

Virginia did not say, this time, that she did not know. She said:

"Yes, I really think he is, but a little alarming, surely, too."

"Oh, I don't find him *alarming*," said Eve,

"No, my dear, you wouldn't. You wouldn't find St. Michael and all his angels alarming. But I'd like to know why Virginia found him so."

"Well . . . he does rather . . . just at first . . . talk to you as if you were Maggie Tulliver and he were Aunt Glegg," Virginia suggested.

Frank laughed, but Eve said:

"No, I don't remember my George Eliot as well as all that, I'm afraid."

The taxi drew up. Frank pressed half-a-crown into Virginia's hand: the brief good-nights were soon over and Virginia sat still in her corner and was driven to Stephanie House. And once again, without in the least knowing why, she felt flat again and a

little desolate. She had had a busy and usefully occupied day and a pleasant evening, and here she sat driving comfortably home after it through a beautiful night. Nothing special or outstanding had occurred: nothing that seemed of the least importance, and yet she had a sense of having passed an important milestone in life. Although nothing cataclysmic had heralded it, she felt as if something significant had happened that evening in her life, and during the next few days, though she could not have said what it was, the impression lived on with her.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

It was Theodore Mostyn who was destined to make it clear to her. In the middle of the summer he proposed to her, and Virginia, who never again would be led into love through pity, refused him. He was unhappy; he was unfortunate; but she did not believe she was specially called upon to make him amends. She was not, she said, "In love" with him: she didn't love him. Mostyn, snatching at his last chance of happiness in a world which had shown him singularly little of it, did not take it well. He was attracted by Virginia, by her ready, her too-ready, sympathy, her feeling for his own small boy, which he tended to misinterpret, by her gentleness and by all the physical sweetness of her young womanhood. Virginia, at this time, was twenty-four, and Mostyn found her well-modelled face as charming in its maturity as Stacey Russell had found it with the bloom of seventeen upon it. Her skin was still clear and warm: her hair as deeply red-brown; and about her expression, when she looked at him, there was a sweetness and wistfulness that always, as long as she lived, would be there for men of his kind.

She allowed him—because she did not know how to prevent him—to pester her for several weeks, until finally she declared that she thought it would be better if they did not meet quite so frequently.

"I'll stay away for a time from the Settlement," she said. "I'm running rather short of stories, anyway."

And Mostyn, very white, replied: "I see. I am happy to be able to supply you with a really good excuse for staying away for the next few weeks."

"I wasn't looking for a good excuse for staying away," she said.

"No? All the same there will soon be no very special reason for going, will there?"

"It has never occurred to me that there ever *is* any 'special' reason."

"It hasn't occurred to you, either, I suppose, that there's someone else you'd do well to see rather less of?"

She said sharply, too sharply: "I don't know what you mean," and in that very instant was aware that she did. And in that instant, too, she acknowledged its truth. So that was what was the matter with her? And she hadn't known—she really hadn't. All the same, it was intolerable that Theodore Mostyn should have known—or should have put it into words. She felt that it was something for which she could never forgive him. Her face burned with shame as she walked on, silent, hoping that he would not answer, that he would acknowledge it as an indiscretion and let it pass. But he did not.

"Virginia, tell me this. If there were no Frank Norman you'd marry me, wouldn't you?"

No Frank Norman? The sunlight went out of the summer day: the birds ceased to sing. She pushed the dread thought out of her mind and shut the door fast upon it.

"Be honest, now, Virginia," Mostyn pressed her. "It is so, isn't it?"

Indignation, pride and a queer sense of personal outrage rushed like stalwarts to her assistance. She knew she would not marry Theodore Mostyn, that nothing would induce her, but her dismay was sharply pierced by the attractive smile he turned upon her.

"That's a question you've no right to ask," she said.

"Is it?"

"Of course it is. Besides, you know the answer. Frank Norman has nothing whatever to do with it. He doesn't come into it."

"He does, my child." He spoke gently, mollified by her change of tone. "He does indeed, though I think perhaps you hardly realize it. But after all, if we're to be judged by Frank Norman, none of us would have much luck with you."

"I think you're absurd."

"I dare say I am, and I'm being a little insolent, too, I've no doubt. But after all, Virginia, you do like me a little, you know."

"Of course I like you. But I don't love you."

"Oh, love! And you spell it with a capital letter, too, don't you? If we waited for Love, few of us would get far."

"*Marriage as a sort of friendship recognized by the police?* Is that what you're offering me?"

"Ah, that was 'marriage at its lowest,' you remember. What I'd like to offer you, if I may, is a 'partnership of companionship

and affectionate friendship.' ”

“You no longer believe in love?”

“I wouldn't say that—but I think a marriage built upon love is a difficult affair. Love is a cruel thing, Virginia, for all we talk so glibly about it—a tyranny against which a whole charter of freedom might be formulated.”

But Virginia's young insurgent heart yearned still after the romantic picture life had shown her briefly and then torn down from its easel.

“What do you put in its place?” she asked.

“What most people make admirable shift with—companionship, friendship, mutual toleration and respect.”

She shook her head.

“I can't,” she said. “I'm awfully sorry, but I'd want so much more than that.”

“All right,” said Mostyn, after a little. “I won't bother you any more. And I apologize for having said what I did. I don't blame you for admiring Frank Norman. Heaven forbid! And you'd be a fool if you didn't. Only, you oughtn't to let him stand in the way of your marrying—somebody, some day. You were meant for marriage. I can't think how you've escaped it. And I don't believe you'll be really happy if you don't marry, eventually.”

“But that's nonsense. I *am* happy—very happy.”

He smiled at her—an eloquent smile which said so plainly: “I know—and I've told you why. But it's a precarious happiness, isn't it, which depends upon the friendship of a married man?”

“All right,” he said. “Don't let's talk about it any more. And forgive my impertinence. I wondered if you'd come to the theatre with me? Do—just to show you've forgiven me.”

They went to their play, and all the evening he was so kind, so charming, so friendly, that she wondered if there was something in his contention—that love in marriage didn't matter, or didn't matter so much as she had supposed; and if there *would* be a chance of happiness with Theodore Mostyn after all. There'd be children, perhaps, and that sense of personal fulfilment that seemed to her sometimes to matter so much. She'd be leading, wouldn't she, a natural, normal life? But no, not with Theodore Mostyn. She could not think of him either as a husband or as the father of her children. She could not marry a man for whom

she felt sorry, a man who was a failure, whose cleverness and talent she had heard Eve Norman dismiss as "a little of everything, save backbone." She could not conceive of a marriage with Theodore Mostyn, apart altogether from this thing he had alleged against her—that she had nothing to give another man because, without knowing it, she had given it all to Frank Norman. And he (and she knew it would always be the same) had no eyes and thought for any woman but his wife. He liked Virginia and was kind to her, and that was all. And that would be all—for ever. Neither did she want it to be otherwise. That single-minded devotion to Eve—courageous, strong-minded, efficient—was one of the things she admired about him. He had a deep, unflinching loyalty to the woman he had chosen before which Virginia bowed her head in willing submission and before which she raised it again in admiration. Loyalty—of mind, body and soul—with all her youth and idealism she greeted it ecstatically.

She said good night to Theodore Mostyn with a sense of relief and a feeling that she did not want to see him again.

II

When Eve Norman invited her to dinner on the eve of her departure *en famille* to the sea, she accepted with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation lightened by a sense of relief that Mostyn would not be there. She could not have borne an audience.

She wanted the evening above all things to prove to her that Mostyn was wrong, but ten minutes of it had not passed before she was aware that he was abundantly right. Eve had placed her, not at Frank's side, as she usually did, but at that of Charles Frome, whose conversation she neglected in a determined attempt to listen to Frank's with somebody else. Every now and then something clear and connected came her way and swept her out of reach of the persistent stream of Frome's quiet talk.

"Oh, Eve? Eve's in Art for all time. . . . She's di Predis' Beatrice d'Este. You'd see, if she'd only wear a rope of pearls twisted in her hair. . . ."

"And di Predis' Beatrice d'Este, went Virginia's thoughts. Yes, so she was—only it wasn't *by* di Predis, that picture, but *after*. If she said that to Frank he'd put his head back and

laugh his acknowledgment of his mistake. "Art's not my strong point," he'd say. "I wonder what *is*?"

"I beg your pardon," she said once again to Frome, who smiled and said quietly: "I was asking if you were interested in the political situation."

With her eyes still on the far end of the table, Virginia's voice was empty, her tone vague.

"I don't know—perhaps. I don't think I know very much about it."

It was nineteen-six, and Algeciras was in the air. But not, apparently, for Virginia. She made a polite effort, swung her eyes from the beloved's face, her mind from what he said.

"We talk about politics sometimes," she said, "at Stephanie House. Mrs. MacLaren, one of our surgeons, is a Socialist. She thinks nothing will improve until we alter the system."

"Do you agree with her?"

"I don't know. Dr. Norman doesn't. She says what we want is a change of heart—the creation of a social conscience."

"Ah, so we do. But I wanted to know what *you* think, and all you do is to quote other people at me."

She laughed. "You see, I don't know *what* I think—except that I haven't much faith in politicians, and I don't believe I've much respect for the political machine."

"Why not?"

"Well, it doesn't seem to matter which party is in power, the things we fight at Stephanie House go on. Poverty, dirt, overcrowding. Politics doesn't seem to touch any of those. And if you read the Board of Trade reports you'd not believe they existed."

"But if not political machinery, what then?"

"Shelley said, didn't he, that the poets were the true legislators of the world?"

"He did. Has it ever struck you that Shelley, like so many other of the world's critics, made rather a mess of his own affairs?"

"I don't know anything about his life. Ought I to?"

"It doesn't matter—at least it matters far more that you should know what he wrote. All the same, the general proposition is true. The people who think they could run the universe mostly evince singularly little ability to run their own. Besides, the practical problems of life don't seem to be the poet's concern."

They're not as a rule very interested in them. Shelley was an exception—and his panacea was universal love. It would be all right if only we'd all love one another. And that, I suppose, is the last thing any of us is likely to do."

He turned a quietly quizzical gaze upon her. "Isn't it so? Have you ever felt that you could, should or *ought* to love everybody you've ever met?"

"Good heavens, *no*!"

"Well—if we can't oppose this universal change of heart to the political machine you disparage, what then?"

"I believe you're laughing at me. I don't blame you. I'm not a constructionist. I only know that I hate poverty and misery."

"Because they make you uncomfortable?"

"One reason, I suppose. But I hate them too, I think, for the same reason that Shelley must have hated them—because I care about justice. It simply isn't fair that so many people should never have a chance. It offends my sense of order and decency. My common sense, too. But I'm no use because I'm vague and know nothing. My political education, like most women's, has been neglected."

"Not women's only, believe me. Political knowledge is cheap—most people buy it for a half-penny each morning. And elections are won on phrases and over the things that matter least. When women come into the arena things may improve."

"I don't see why. Most women want a vote as far as I can see in order to make things better for women."

"Well?"

"That's all right, of course. But it isn't everything. Lots of the women speakers I've heard talk as though it's a nice world for everybody but women. When things are bad I suppose they're a little worse for women than for men—I usedn't to know that—it's one of the things Stephanie House has taught me. But I don't feel as if I want to go out and do battle for women only."

"That sounds as though you agree with your Mrs. MacLaren. The things that are wrong are wrong all round."

"Yes—people don't *mean* to be horrid or cruel. They're forced into it. Take our husbands. The husbands whose wives come to Stephanie House, I mean. We have a lot of trouble with them, you know. They won't let their wives come in and be really ill. They have to drag backwards and forwards when

they can hardly stand, because their husbands are so useless and mustn't, even in times of emergency, be kept awake at night by a crying baby. They don't *mean* to be beastly. They don't want their wives to suffer, but they haven't enough imagination to make an effort towards getting them well. Sometimes they do come in—the wives, I mean. We get a woman all screwed up for an 'op.', and then 'e' comes in and upsets her again. That, it seems to me, is what's wrong with the world—people simply never see the other person's point of view. I'm quite as bad as anybody else. I want things for myself—my way—just like anybody else." She laughed. "Only I haven't had any luck."

Frome had no time to reply, for just then Eve caught Virginia's eye and she rose and passed down and out of the room.

III

"Have you heard we're taking young Mostyn with us to Broadstairs on Friday?" Eve asked her as they sat down.

"Yes—he'll like that. He wants a holiday. I thought him a nice boy."

"So did I," said Eve. "He really *is* the charming kid Frank said he was." She looked as though that surprised her, Virginia thought. "He'll make a good companion for Mark—at least I hope so."

Eve sighed a little, and Virginia, aware that Mark was at times a trying young man, chewed her rejoinder over rather too carefully and ended by swallowing most of it. She felt strangely removed from everybody. The conversation moved on without her, and presently the men came back, and Paradise, for Virginia, was builded anew, for Frank Norman came across to her at once and sat down at her side.

"I want to talk to you," he said, "about Theo Mostyn. May I?"

The colour jumped high in Virginia's face. Her heart jumped a little, too. "Oh yes," she said. "Yes, of course."

"He's extremely unwell. I've tried to persuade him to see a doctor, but he refuses. I wondered if you would perhaps . . ."

"I? What can I do?"

"If you would go over one afternoon, soon, to see him. I think that would do him good. He says you haven't been for some time."

"No, that's true. Did he tell you why?"

"No, not exactly, but I think he meant me to guess. He asked you to marry him, didn't he?"

"Yes. I . . . I really couldn't."

Frank smiled at her apologetic vehemence.

"But does that mean you can no longer be friends?"

"No, not necessarily."

"Then that isn't why you've been leaving him alone?"

"In a way. I just felt I didn't want to see him again."

"Poor Mostyn. Isn't that rather hard on him?"

Harder, his face said, than he had expected from her.

"It wasn't because he asked me to marry him and I refused that I've been keeping away. There was another reason. I can't explain, I'm afraid."

"I'm sure it's an excellent reason. Only, if you *could* go and see him one afternoon soon it would be a real kindness. We're taking Shane with us to-morrow, as you know, and I expect he'll miss him. They've always spent their holidays together until now."

"Yes, of course I'll go," said Virginia suddenly. "I didn't know he was ill. What's wrong with him?"

"A bad cold which seems to have lodged on his chest. He takes no care of himself. He ought to have a holiday. By the way, what about your own?"

"Sylvia wants me to go down to Cornwall at the end of the month."

"Then do. Cornwall agrees with you, and I think you want a holiday. You look a little pale—as if some sea air would do you good."

Virginia said nothing—could think of nothing save that to go to Cornwall when Sylvia suggested meant leaving town just as Frank Norman came back to it. She sat there drowned in misery, hearing his voice and Eve's, Sylvia's and John's talking of holiday plans, of Broadstairs, Cornwall and things akin, and wondering how much longer she could endure it.

In those few minutes she knew that this was the end of the road for her—that she couldn't go on. She couldn't, when he came back, when *she* came back and the holidays were over, go on seeing him so much and so casually. It was like running her breast all the time against a sword. She felt she would die of it. But a shaft of wintry humour shot suddenly across her misery as her eyes rested upon Eve and Sylvia. She thought: "Isn't it

just my luck to fall in love . . . for the third time . . . with the wrong man! I'm being unnecessarily tragic. I shall get over it. I'll go to Cornwall and bathe and walk until I drop and come back cured. . . ."

IV

On the day that Kent received Frank Norman and his family, she went out to Forest Gate to see Theodore Mostyn. He was up, and lying on a couch beneath a window open to the London street upon which dwelt the hot sun of an August afternoon.

"You've found a little time for me now, have you?" he greeted her.

"If you talk like that you will make me sorry I came," she retorted. "Look at these roses. Aren't they lovely?"

"Too lovely for Forest Gate."

"You should leave Forest Gate."

"Why?"

"Because there are better places to live in."

"Bayswater," he said with a sneer which she ignored.

"No, I wasn't thinking of Bayswater. Why shouldn't you live farther out where there's fresh air and a garden to be had?"

"One of your damned suburbs, I suppose. Thank you. I lived in one of them once—that's why I chose Forest Gate."

"But Forest Gate's no use to you. You want fresh air and a garden."

"You've said that before. Do you propose I should dig in the garden?"

"It wouldn't hurt you. You look as though a little digging would do you good."

"Do I? Well, I'll strike a bargain with you. I'll go to your suburb—you shall choose it—if you'll come too."

"Oh, please . . ."

"It's a fair bargain. And the suburb would do you good, too, shouldn't wonder."

Virginia flushed.

"Theodore, you know you did promise not . . . to bother me."

She finished with her roses and came and sat down by his side.

"I wish you'd see a doctor. I believe you've a temperature."

"No, I haven't. It's this confounded heat. Doctors won't do me any good."

"You're run down—out of sorts. You want a tonic."

"No—you're the only tonic I want."

"Well, here I am. . . . Be nice to me, Theo."

"I've asked you again to marry me. Isn't that enough?"

"Too much. Talk about something else, Theo, or I shall have to go. There are plenty of other topics besides me."

"Frank Norman, for instance."

"Theo, please. . . ."

"Oh, all right. What do you want me to talk about? The alleged 'German menace?'"

"No, I don't believe in that. It's newspaper talk, isn't it?"

"God knows. International politics are not up my street. The demands of Trade Unionism, perhaps, or the Imperialism of Mr. Keir Hardie, or the ant-like Utopia of an Eve Norman?"

"Oh, do be serious—and *nicer*. I've brought you some books I hope you'll like. Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma*, for one. And *Man and Superman*—ah, and *The Man of Property*, by John Galsworthy."

"You shouldn't spend your money on me."

"Why not?"

"Well, why *should* you?"

"You make friendship very difficult, you know, Theo."

"Yes, I'm a failure all along the line—even at friendship."

"You're very successful considered as the complete pessimist, you know. What about some tea?"

She went into the kitchen to make it. The room was dark, not too clean and not very tidy. The woman who came in by day to "do" for its owner was out taking the afternoon air and Virginia sniffed suspiciously at the cups she supposed she had washed. The bread was stale, the butter salt, the heat had not agreed with the milk. Virginia contemplated them all in dismay, then picked up a basket, put on her hat and went out into the High Street to buy others. When she took in the result of her labours upon a tray which she had covered with some clean paper serviettes in lieu of the dirty tray-cloth the kitchen drawer had yielded up, Mostyn looked concerned.

"She'll hate you—and probably give me notice."

"Let her. She's a very poor specimen."

"She's better than nobody."

"You'd find somebody much better very easily. Or I'd find her for you."

"That's all very well. Why should I be disturbed to provide you with your nice middle-class comforts?"

"They're not comforts. Cleanliness is a necessity. So is good wholesome food—and those two things are all you'll find on that tray. Why do you let a woman of that kind bully you?"

As she poured out his tea she reflected that all his life he must have let women do that. He wanted women to be sweet, tender, charitable and placid—and they never had been, for him. He'd no right to expect it, of course. Virginia viewed his cataloguing of the virtues as Male and Female with the greatest disfavour: but she was sorry for him, all the same. Even to *want* to do that was a handicap. For all women were not sweet and gentle, any more than all men were loyal and daring.

He said: "*You* bully me, too. You're a bullying sex."

She laughed and handed him her appetizing, daintily cut bread and butter.

"New bread!" he said, with the delight of a child. "How did you manage to cut it so thin?"

"I dipped the knife in boiling water. It tames the newest and sprightliest loaf. Pass it on to your domestic help. It's a useful thing to know."

He was perceptibly better when the meal was done and considerably less the complete pessimist. She would not listen to what he had to say about Frank Norman, but found a precarious pleasure in encouraging him to talk about the Norman children, whom he adored, especially the lovely Mona. Mona, he said, had great talent, but if her mother had her way she'd hide it under a bushel. Both she and the boy would have to fight if they wanted their own way with life. "Mona can be a woman lawyer or a doctor, but she won't want to be either, and Mark—Mark will never want to be anything but a farmer."

Virginia laughed.

"How can you possibly tell—at his age? He thinks he'd like to farm because he goes to stay with his grandfather who is a farmer and can make farming sound entrancing. And there's an aunt married to a farmer, too, isn't there? And as for Mona . . . why, it seems to me she's very lucky. Eve will never stand in her way. She'll have perfect freedom."

"To do what her mother likes."

"Oh, you simply can't be fair to Eve Norman. What about Judy?"

Judy's future, it seemed, touched him less. Judy would always get what she wanted out of life. She was that sort. At the tender age of six he professed to find in her the seeds of every quality he most disliked in her sex.

"Judy's a darling," Virginia said. "The best-tempered child I ever did see. I wish she were mine."

"Foolish person, aren't you, to envy another woman her children?"

"It's only my conceit. I rather fancy I'd be a success as a mother."

"Then why don't you marry me?"

"Oh, Theo, you're incorrigible. I don't feel half so certain about my success as a wife—yours or anybody else's. Being a wife isn't easy."

"Nothing's easy. Everything's damn difficult and damn impossible. Can I have some more tea?"

"If you don't insist on holding my hand while I pour it out."

He let go her hand and sat there smiling at her.

"Why do you try to pretend you don't like men—and that you've no use for husbands?"

"Heavens! When did I ever pretend that?"

"Well, just now, for instance, when you tried to make me believe you wanted not a husband but a father for your children. Can't you see how insulting that is to a man?"

Virginia stared at him.

"Really, you are the most *unfair* person, Theo. I simply said I was more certain I'd be a success as a mother than as a wife. There's nothing queer about that, for most women are, I imagine."

"Don't I know it? Do you think men are more successful as fathers than as husbands?"

"Perhaps. I know so little about them. I seem to have lived with women all my life."

"It doesn't show."

"The first lot made rather a mess of my life, though."

"That doesn't show, either."

"You see, they taught me that women never got anything in this world worth having except through men. It took me a long while to find out they were wrong. And it cost something, too."

"Are you so sure they were wrong?"

"Why, yes. The only thing in life worth having is some useful

service—something to do that is worth while. That may come through men or it may not. In my case, it hasn't."

"You don't give it the chance."

"That isn't to say I never will. You can't force these things. If you could make me feel I *ought* to marry you, I suppose I should. But you haven't."

"But I need you."

She wrinkled her brows at him.

"That isn't enough. You've got to make a woman feel she needs you."

"No woman's ever paid me that compliment, certainly."

"Oh, you're absurd. You married one woman for love."

"It didn't last."

"No—but you had it once. She *must* have wanted to marry you. . . . You can't cut out a thing like that. It's all part of your human experience. Somebody told me that once when something I'd counted upon didn't last. . . . I didn't believe her. But she was right." She looked at her watch and got up. "I've got to fly. I promised to be back by six."

"I wish you hadn't."

"I'll come again if you want me. . . . I wish you'd promise to see a doctor."

"I won't. You're all the doctor I want."

"I'll come on Friday, but if you aren't better then I shall find a doctor myself."

"I'd be all right if I could sleep."

"Twenty grains of aspirin in some hot milk. And fewer cigarettes."

"P'raps you're right."

"I'm sure I am."

"You see, I *do* need you. I'd be as good as gold if you'd take me on. I wouldn't give you any trouble at all. I'd be a really excellent grown-up child."

Again she wrinkled her brows at him. She did not want a grown-up child for a husband. She did not want to marry a man who wanted looking after, for whom she felt sorry. Her strong maternal feeling led her part of the way towards him, but stopped short there. It could not ever again play her a trick. She didn't love this man and she was not to be persuaded that she did. But because she cared for efficiency and order and lived herself beneath the vigilant eye of these things, she wanted to

teach him to help himself. But that, for ever, he should want to hang on to her skirts—she found that quite a terrifying idea.

"Here are your books," she said, "and a lemon drink if your cough bothers you. What's that woman going to give you for supper?"

"I don't know. The first thing she thinks of, probably."

"Don't have it, then. Tell her you'd like some fried sole."

"She couldn't fry sole—or anything else."

"Well, tell her to choose the fish and leave the shop to fry it.

No . . . I'll do it as I go."

"You'll find a fried-fish shop along the road."

"A nice clean one?"

"I expect so."

"Don't you *really* mind?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I wish you wouldn't go."

"I must. I can't let everybody down."

"Do you ever think of anything save that clinic of Maud Norman's?"

"Of course."

"But you care more about it than anything else."

"It's my *work*—I chose it. There isn't anything I'd rather do. I sometimes think I'd have liked to be a doctor like Maud Norman; but it's too late to think of that."

"You always talk as if you were sixty."

"I'm twenty-five in November."

"It's a great age. . . . Virginia—haven't you ever wanted to marry anybody?"

"Once—ages ago, when I was nineteen."

"What happened?"

"He married somebody else."

"He didn't care for you."

"Oh, yes . . . but something happened. It all came to an end."

"Were you in love with him?"

"Terribly."

The old word, at which Richard used to smile, came naturally to her lips.

"Poor Virginia."

"You don't have to pity me. I've quite got over it. . . . And now I'm really going. . . . I'll see about that fried sole for you

—and I'll try to come again on Friday. Good-bye."

She nodded to him from the doorway, smiled and went.

She was half an hour late and her conscience reproached her—and Maud Norman's quiet: "Oh, here you are. I'm glad you're back. We've had a tiresome afternoon."

"I'm sorry I'm late. I went out to see Mr. Mostyn. Frank asked me to, if I could."

"Oh, *Mostyn!* *That's* where you've been!"

Her keen look brought the colour to Virginia's face.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes, lots. But I wish you'd been here at three o'clock. That wretched Mrs. Morgan's husband turned up and they let him see her. I can't help feeling somehow you'd have prevented that."

"I'd have tried. What happened?"

"What you might expect."

"You mean she went back with him? Oh, how perfectly *sickening*, after the way I've worked at her—the way we've *all* worked at her."

"I know. Well, what Mr. Morgan had to say—about his sleepless nights and the crying baby—undid all that. She's gone. Lord, these husbands! The sleepless nights wouldn't have hurt *him*. . . . But there's no use talking about it. I've another case for you. A young married woman whose husband and doctor say she's suffering from hysteria. There's a year-old baby. The 'hysteria' dates from his arrival. Her mother writes to me. She seems a sensible woman. I've arranged to see her and the patient to-morrow morning. They'll come to you at nine-thirty. The patient will want careful handling."

"All right," said Virginia. "What's her name?"

Maud turned over some papers on her table.

"Oh, Redwood. Margaret Redwood. . . . What's the matter with Theodore Mostyn?"

"I don't know. . . . He's had a touch of bronchitis, I think, but that seems better. He won't see a doctor. I've suggested he takes a tonic."

"He won't though. I know the type. . . . I hope you aren't going to waste *all* your half-holidays on him. I can't have you sitting in sick-rooms when you ought to be getting fresh air. Which reminds me. What about your own holiday? Sylvia says she's suggested you go down to her at the end of the month."

That will suit me very well unless you've any other plans?"

"None, thank you," said Virginia. "How long do you want me to stay away?"

Maud Norman laughed.

"I don't want you to be away at all, but I'm sure you ought to be for several weeks. Have we been overworking you? You look tired lately, and have been collecting a fresh lot of shadows beneath your eyes. I think you'd better stay three or four weeks. Evelyn and I can manage to hold the fort—we don't expect, in September, to be submerged by private patients. So you go to Cornwall and forget about us."

Virginia went there empty of vitality, puzzled, despondent, a little afraid; and Sylvia Shelley looked at her with concern, fed her on milk and cream and sent her early to bed. And John said to her: "What's wrong with our Jinny? She's not the same girl. Has she told you?"

Sylvia said quietly: "No, but I can guess. I've seen it coming."

John looked at her and saw the truth in her face.

"Norman? Good lord, you're not serious? Why, the thing's hopeless!"

"I know. So does she. That's the trouble."

"She'll get over it. She's not the neurotic sort that cherishes a hopeless passion. Of course she'll get over it."

"Oh yes, in time. But not if she goes on seeing him. And there's the meanwhile, anyhow. What are we to do about it?"

"She doesn't, if I may say so, fall in love very wisely."

"Who does?"

"Oh, come now. . . ."

She smiled at him.

"We don't count. We are of the lucky ones. Besides, I came a cropper first of all."

"I wish you'd try to forget that."

"Why should I? It keeps me humble. . . . Oh, we *must* do something to help Jinny over this stile. Take the car out this afternoon and run her round to Bedruthen Steps."

"But I don't *want* to spend my afternoon with some other woman."

"Oh, John, do be sensible. Besides, I've some things I simply must do for our young daughter."

"That young woman already takes up far too much of your time."

Sylvia laughed.

"Wait until she arrives—and see what she does with yours."

"Sylvia, I wish you wouldn't insist upon my being a knight-errant this afternoon. I've a marked fancy for sitting about with you in the garden."

"Oh, please be accommodating, darling. Besides, it'll do you good to get away from me."

"Well, I warn you—I won't go on being paired off with our Virginia like this. It's immoral. Your concern for Jinny is only an excuse for getting rid of a perfectly nice husband. Thank Heaven Frome's coming next week. He can take a hand in this knight-errant business."

"He won't grumble. He likes Virginia. Now do run away and find her. You won't have to look farther than the day nursery."

"Supposing she won't come with me?"

"Anyone would come with you, darling, anywhere. I'm an absurdly trusting wife. . . . 'John, do go.'"

He laughed, threw her a kiss, and obeyed.

CHAPTER SIX

I

CHARLES FROME arrived three days later, at the end of Virginia's second week, and a fortnight later, on the eve of their joint departure for town, proposed to her and was accepted.

Virginia had known, long before then, that he was going to ask her. They had, since his arrival, seen a good deal of each other, for Sylvia's daughter chose that fortnight to be troublesome, and her guests saw little either of her or her husband. Virginia, thrown into Charles's company, had her initial liking for him reinforced; she admired his force of character and found him an unexpectedly satisfying companion. Realizing with a start that sooner or later he would ask her to marry him, she was suddenly confronted with a new and unwavering self quietly determined when he did to say yes—a self that said “when” without once stopping to consider if perhaps, after all, the word it wanted was “if.” Nevertheless, when the proposal materialized to justify so much certitude, that other Virginia, who had looked on amazed at this confident other self, managed to speak first. And she said, simply: “I think you ought to know that I don't love you.”

“I do know that,” said Charles Frome. He looked at her very kindly and quietly, and did not add: “Love will come.” But she had not expected him to do that.

She said: “Doesn't it make any difference?”

“Not to my wanting to marry you. Nothing could.”

“But aren't you afraid that if I marry you I may afterwards fall in love with somebody else?”

“That would be my risk. You're an honest person, Virginia.”

“How do you know? You don't know anything about me.”

“Perhaps I know more than you think. Certainly I know enough.”

“What, for example?”

“That although you do not love me, you do know what love is.”

She smiled.

“You mean I shouldn't be likely to make a fool of myself by

imagining myself in love with somebody else?"

He smiled too.

"Do I? I think I mean what I said—that you are an honest person."

"I would like to be married," Virginia said, "and I think I would like to marry you. Is that good enough?"

"Quite good enough," said Charles Frome, and held out his hand to her. She took it, came quite close and let him kiss her, very gently, on the mouth. Then they turned and walked slowly back to the house.

The moon was sailing up above the dead trees of John Shelley's old forgotten orchard, lifting beneath its white light twisted branch and bough with queer and ghostly effect. Virginia and Charles had been watching the sun fall into the sea, and the moon looked down upon them now through the dead trees like the drowned sun's pale ghost. By mutual consent they stood still and looked at her. A pale, wan thing climbing steadily up the rim of a deep blue vault.

As she watched, Virginia remembered that summer afternoon down there in Imberford woods with Richard Saxton, and all the divine compulsion which drove them both. (*"When, Virginia, when? Whenever you like, as soon as you like. . . ."*) And tumbling into her mind, too, came some memory of what Theodore Mostyn had offered her in its place—companionship, friendship, mutual toleration, and respect, and her own desperate reaching out after all the things "other people made shift without." (*"I'd want so much more than that. . . ."*) Yet these "make-shift" things were those which she might also look for in marriage with Charles Frome. She loved him no more than she loved Mostyn. Wherein, then, lay the difference? In the difference between the two men; in this fact, that one man, as she believed, could make her forget what she was missing and the other eternally remind her of it. She thought: If I can't have what I want there are at least certain things I can't do without—and Charles has them and Theodore hasn't. Character, force, a fine alert mind with sharp, keen edges. Theodore had merely drawn her along the faint thin line of pity. Never in a thousand years could he have blotted out the figure of Frank Norman, and she felt that Charles, given a chance, very probably could. She definitely approved and liked him. But for Frank she might very well have fallen in love with him. Even as it was, there

were things he did and said which sent her half-way to loving him.

Down there in the ghostly orchard he pulled her up suddenly against him and something in Virginia stirred faintly as he held and kissed her closely. She felt that she would like to give herself to this man, that only so could she even begin to pay the debt she owed him not only for loving her (though she was grateful to him for that) but because he gave her this hope of deliverance from something she already knew to be stronger than herself.

"Virginia, say you'll marry me soon."

"If you really wish."

"At Christmas?"

"Yes."

She returned his urgent glance steadily. She hoped he understood that she, too, wanted it to be soon, that she would have no peace now until she had finally surrendered to him. Only so could she perhaps forget—and keep from him—the knowledge that something of her he would never have, that long ago she had thrown it down at the feet of some one who did not want it, had no use for it and hadn't even noticed it was there.

II

She went straight indoors and sought Sylvia.

"Charles Frome has asked me to marry him," she said at once.

"I've said yes—and I haven't told him about Stacey."

"Well?" said Sylvia quietly.

"I don't propose to. Do you think I ought?"

"You know perfectly well I don't."

"Yes, but I wanted to hear you say it. You see, somehow I don't feel, with Charles, as I felt with Richard. I can't explain why, exactly. Perhaps it was because I loved Richard."

She hoped Sylvia wouldn't say: "And you don't love Charles?" for she was aware that Sylvia, like Mostyn, knew how the land lay. Sylvia didn't say it, but her straight glance deepened the rich colour in Virginia's face.

"Charles called me an honest woman," she said. "But I'm not. I told him that as I wasn't in love with him I might, perhaps, fall in love after we were married, with somebody else. I didn't tell him I was already in love—quite impossibly and frantically in love—with another man, and that that was my chief reason for marrying *him*."

"You're quite sure that *is* the chief reason?"

"Unless you count the biological one—that I want a husband because I want children."

"I do, I think. You're the kind of woman who ought to be married. You like Charles Frome and he's fond of you. I'm sure you'll both be very happy. Charles will make a good husband."

"I know. I'm not so sure that I shall make him a good wife, but I'll have a try. I'd hate to make him unhappy. I'd like to think it was worth it—to Charles."

"I'm sure it will be. Jinny, I'm sure you're going to be very happy."

Virginia smiled rather wanly. In Sylvia's presence most of the exaltation of the ghostly orchard had deserted her. She would feel better about it all, she thought, when she got away from Porteath and Sylvia's personal idyll, which somehow spoiled the look of her own calmly contemplated union. Yet she was not shaken in her resolve to marry Charles. She wanted above all things now to marry him. Married to one man she would not think of another—surely she could depend upon herself for that?

"It ought to be interesting," she said. "I shall play Maggie Tulliver to Charles's Aunt Glegg for some time to come, I fancy."

Sylvia asked: "When are you going to be married?"

"At the Christmas vacation."

"Oh, but I shan't be able to come."

"I hadn't thought of that. Perhaps you will."

"I don't believe you care a scrap. You *ought* to have thought of it, Jinny. I don't believe you *want* me at your wedding."

"Of course I want you. Don't be idiotic. It's time I went and left you to get to bed. Good night, my dear."

She stooped and kissed her, was held lightly for a moment, then pulled herself away and went.

III

Sylvia said to John:

"Virginia makes me feel as if I've no right to be happy."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"No right to be married to you."

"Why not?"

"Well, ours, you see, is the sort of marriage Virginia's always dreamed of.

"It's the sort everybody dreams of."

"Yes, but I always feel with Virginia that I've cheated her out of her chance. If I'd prevented that fiasco with Stacey she'd have married that young man Richard and lived happy ever after."

"Don't you think she's going to be happy with Frome?"

"I do—yes, indeed I do. It's the best thing that could have happened."

"Well, then?"

"Oh, I *know*," said Sylvia, "my thoughts aren't very logical, I'm afraid. Only I wish she hadn't made it so clear—to herself, I mean, not to me, though she did that, too—that she's marrying him because she can't ever marry somebody else."

"My dear Sylvie, you put altogether too much stress upon our Jinny's feeling for Norman. I tell you she'll get over it. She knows he'll never look at any woman but his wife—and *she* wouldn't look at *him* if he did. She's far too sensible to go on for ever with a thing like that. We'll go back to the subject in six months' time. Meantime, do for goodness' sake put down that brush and get into bed. I never knew anybody take so long. Draw the curtains back. It's such a lovely night."

Sylvia drew the curtains back. "I wish the moon shone on the sea in the west countree," she said as she did so.

"Full of complaints to-night, aren't you?"

Sylvia laughed as she put out the lamp and got into bed.

"Not so very," she said. "I don't want *you* altered, anyway."

IV

When Maud Norman agreed with Sylvia Shelley that Charles Frome was a lucky man, Sylvia laughed.

"You've got a whole set of reasons of your own for thinking so," she told her.

"Well—*isn't* he lucky to find that Virginia agrees with him that marriage is an all-time job?"

"How do you know he thinks so?"

"If he didn't she'd not be so certain she must give up her job here."

"Virginia intends to have children."

"Well, she can't have any for nine months even if she begins at once. Why should Charles have her entirely? Is she as much in love as all that?"

"I don't think she's in love with him at all."

"Oh, if it's that kind of marriage why shouldn't she come back here?"

"Just because it *is* that kind of marriage."

"No, I don't see that."

"Well, she thinks it's up to her to make sacrifices . . . to give up something she really values."

Maud Norman fanned herself with a piece of paper she picked up from her desk.

"Heavens," she said. "This life of the emotions is exhausting. I wonder more women don't find it out."

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER ONE

I

FRANK NORMAN made a speech in Virginia's honour at her wedding, and sometimes she thought the only thing she remembered of the day's happenings was the look on his face as he was doing it. It almost seemed as if that recollection was a more intimate part of her life than those days she had spent with Charles at Porteath—as if she were living in a dream in which everything was topsy-turvy. And then, suddenly—ten days after they got back to town—Charles fell ill and that look on one man's face as he made a pretty speech in her honour and that month at the sea with another seemed likely to be the beginning and the end of Virginia's married life.

All her life she remembered that day in murky February. It was a Friday, a busy day for Charles, who had an afternoon lecture at a big girls' school at Ascot and two others during the evening at the University. In the morning, there beside her breakfast-plate was a letter in Frank Norman's handwriting. She despised herself for the joy which rose up in her at the sight of it, and because she could not keep the colour out of her cheeks nor dim sufficiently the bright eager note in her voice as she proclaimed its contents to Charles.

"It's from Frank. Theodore Mostyn's ill again and he wonders if I'm free this evening and will go along and lend a hand at the Settlement. He suggests, as he knows you won't be in to dinner, that I go to Marne House for a simple meal at six-thirty. Eve won't be there—she has a meeting. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least. Tell Frank, though, not to keep you very late. Or shall I come as far as the Bank, to meet you?"

"No, don't—I might keep you waiting."

"Oh, but Frank comes this way, of course. I'd forgotten."

"Yes," said Virginia, who had not.

After breakfast, having seen Charles off for the day, Virginia went out to speak to Frank Norman on the 'phone. Charles

would not have the telephone in the house. He had, Virginia found, several "old-fashioned" ideas of that kind. Frank was brief on the 'phone, but delighted to know that she was coming. His voice was like nectar to her. She could get drunk on it, and as she put back the receiver she leaned her head for a moment against the wall as if she really had. It hasn't worked, she thought. Marriage hasn't done the trick. I oughtn't to go. . . . But I must—I'll die if I don't. She opened the door and once outside the shop walked very fast down the road as if she were escaping from something.

All day long she trod on air.

And then at five o'clock Charles came in, looking a strange colour and complaining of internal pains. He had come straight back from Ascot, he said, had cancelled his evening lectures and come home to go to bed. He supposed he'd caught a chill, but was feeling too unwell just then to be aggrieved about it.

Virginia, who was, just a little, saw him installed in bed and went away to change her frock. There was a new green one in which she meant to array herself, the one item in her wedding trousseau which had not as yet been worn. She slipped into it with as much speed as its tube-like dimensions allowed, and surveyed the results with anxiety. It would do. Green was her colour. She was glad she hadn't worn this frock before: glad that she had saved it. The word floated perkily into her mind. She did not turn it out. But though she said, with a little laugh: "He never looks at what you wear!" it made no difference. The green frock, fresh, untouched till now, was part of her evening. She wanted to look well. Did she want Frank to say: "Marriage agrees with you"? He always noticed things like that, at least—whether you looked well, or not so well or tired or a little off-colour.

In the green frock "saved" and worn for somebody else's husband, she went down again to her own. He was no better, he said. He felt very sick. He murmured weakly that he supposed this must be what they called a bilious attack. He had never had one before—or was it all part of this infernal chill? He looked at Virginia out of heavy, pain-filled eyes, as though he thought she could help him, and Virginia, who knew enough about illness to understand that this was no mild attack of whatever it was, regarded him in dismay.

"Charles, you must let me send for a doctor. Really we *ought* to be on the 'phone."

With the dislike of the healthy person to admit he was ill enough for the services of a doctor, Charles shook his head. "I'll be all right presently. Don't bother," he said, and shut his eyes as if the colour of her frock hurt them.

"I wish," said Virginia, "I weren't going out. I dare say I could put it off."

Charles opened his eyes and looked at her. She saw in them only the reflex of his condition and not the knowledge that he understood she had not quite offered to give up her outing.

"Please don't worry, my dear. There isn't anything you can do."

"Are you sure! Wouldn't you *like* me to stay?"

"Hate it," said Charles feebly.

She sat there looking at him, fighting something within herself and knowing, knowing all the time, that she would lose.

"You still there?" he said. "Do go, my dear. You'll be late."

"But I hate leaving you."

"I'll be better left. I'll get it over while you're gone."

"Oh, Charles . . ."

"Run away," said Charles, suddenly irritable. "I don't want an audience. Leave word nobody's to come up here unless I ring. Good-bye . . . hope you enjoy yourself."

Virginia hesitated, then got up quickly and went out. Upstairs she covered the attractive green frock against which Charles had closed his eyes with a soft fur coat he had given her, added to the whole a black "merry widow" hat with a drooping feather, and regarded the result in her mirror with a glance in which approval of the sartorial effect was crossed by disapproval of the thing for which she had achieved it. I ought not to go, she said to herself; but knew that that knowledge would not prevent her.

On the way down she opened the door of their common room, but Charles was not there. Charles was in the bathroom, being atrociously sick.

"Charles . . . Charles . . . are you sure you're all right?"

She wanted to think it was anxiety and concern she heard in her voice, but knew, all the time, that it was vexation and exasperation that he should have chosen this evening to be sick.

A haggard Charles came presently to the bathroom door.

"You look dreadful," Virginia said; but added consolingly: "But one always does when one feels sick. Get back into bed and I'll tell Ethel to bring you a couple of hot-water bottles."

She pulled at his pillows, adjusted the bedclothes, pressed a kiss upon his forehead, which was wet, and took her departure.

II

At eleven o'clock a young woman more than a little *elevée* put her key in the door and instantly walked into the hustle and turmoil of a house across the threshold of which Death had straddled already one foot. The doctor was there and an important-looking Ethel, and all the paraphernalia of mortal sickness. Charles had already entered upon his night of agony and crisis.

"Ptomaine poisoning," said the doctor, as she entered in her smart apparel, with her flushed cheek and sparkling glances, the result of an evening spent in another man's company. "Yes, very serious, I'm afraid. I was only sent for an hour ago. He ought to have seen a doctor two or three hours earlier."

"He thought . . . I thought . . . it was a chill, a bilious attack. He wouldn't let me fetch a doctor before I went out. . . . Oh, doctor, he is going to get better, isn't he?"

"I don't know . . . I'll come back presently. He's very ill. That's all I can say at the moment."

That night brought Virginia to her senses. At every one of its revolting and hideous stages she told herself: You knew he was ill, much worse than he thought—or would admit, perhaps. There isn't any excuse for you. You left him. You left him to die. You left him because an evening in another man's company was worth more than anything else in the world to you.

She remembered how to Frank she had made light of his illness; she had done that to make her own position tenable to herself. Obviously she could not be there eating a quiet meal with him, with happiness rushing out from her at every pore, if her husband were gravely ill. To fortify her contention that he wasn't she had dragged Charles's miseries into that realm of faint mockery where dwell the minor and less attractive ills of mankind, like sea sickness and that stomachic disorder, the bilious attack, which Charles would have it he had. Charles

was not gravely but only humiliatingly and grotesquely unwell. She had covered him up and left him to it, prone on the burning lake of five hot-water bottles.

That phrase, of which she had been so proud, came back to her throughout that intolerable night. He'd die . . . she knew he would die. Nobody could suffer like this and live through it. Prone on the burning lake of five hot-water bottles. . . . She had laughed whilst he had lain there in agony, alone, too ill even to ring the bell. It was Ethel who'd come up at ten o'clock and found him, and frightened to death rushed off for a doctor.

Ten o'clock. . . . At ten o'clock she had been waiting for somebody to find a taxi-cab, had been thrilling to the thought that she was going to ride in it at Frank Norman's side all the way down to the Bank where they would get a 'bus. And inside the taxi he said what she had been waiting all the evening to hear him say: "You look very well. Marriage certainly agrees with you. Please come and see us all one afternoon while the bloom's still there."

Us . . . Always us. She thought she must die if some day he didn't say "me" or "I." She was a friend of the family—somebody they all knew. She might ride with him in a taxi every day of her life without getting out of him any more than that. Didn't he know, didn't he guess, couldn't he see—couldn't *everybody* see?—what she wanted? No, he'd never guess—he'd never "see" in a thousand years. She thought, with a kind of bitter fury, of the men who'd wanted to make love to her, to kiss her. And she thought of Charles who did both, who trusted her and had sent her off to have a "pleasant evening." A profound and bitter contempt for herself washed over her, but she emerged like a swimmer in salt seas, free and happy again. It didn't matter—none of that mattered—if she could go on seeing him sometimes. She'd never get anything other than this cool-rooted friendship he'd always offered her; but that, at least, she must have. The very sight of him intoxicated her: the way his hair grew, his thin delicate face, the loose way his clothes hung upon him, the way he smiled, his trick of throwing back his head when he laughed. There in the dim taxi she had remembered suddenly the way she caught him sometimes looking at Eve, and was tortured by it. She thought, wildly, insanely: I'd die to-morrow if he'd look at me, to-night, just once, like that. . . .

He didn't. He never would. She knew that. In that way

she didn't exist. No woman did, for him, save Eve. Apart altogether from this raving, tearing physical effect he had upon her, it was for this single-mindedness she loved him. But though in her saner moments she acquiesced in it, to-night she knew she was not sane at all. She acquiesced in nothing. She might be married to Charles: it might be Charles to whom she gave herself, but it was Frank she loved, Frank who filled her thoughts all the time, even within the circle of Charles's arms. She couldn't help it. Nothing could alter a thing like that. Nothing. She'd cherish this wild, sweet dream as long as she lived, and take it with her to the grave.

In that heady state of noble renunciation she had put the key in the door and walked into—this.

III

All the time—all the time she'd wanted Frank to take her in his arms and kiss her, Charles had lain there in the dark, alone, suffering—this. And Frank hadn't kissed her and never would—and now Charles was going to die.

She could see that the doctor, when he came back just after midnight, thought so, too. She had sent Ethel to bed and had taken charge of the sick-room. But the doctor didn't approve. She knew that. He'd taken a dislike to her, seeing her come in like that when she must have gone out knowing her husband was ill. It was obvious that she'd forgotten him—that she'd never thought about him until that moment when she'd put her key in the door and seen the doctor standing there—and Ethel's face, frightened, disapproving. He wouldn't, this man, tell her anything. He suggested getting a nurse. She acquiesced meekly: anything, everything. But she was not, she said, without experience: she was used to obeying orders. She looked at Charles, speechless, ghastly, saw him make a little gesture of dissent.

"He wants *me*, I think," she said. "Charles . . . do you want me to stay?"

He moved his head. Faintly she heard: "Don't go away . . . Jinny."

"You see," she said.

"Very well."

The hideous night passed. At six o'clock in the morning Charles lay very still in his bed. His eyes were shut. He looked

as though he would never open them again, as if never in this wide world would he move so much as a little finger. He had, she found, hardly any pulse at all. She had never seen such exhaustion in a grown man before, and it laid a chill upon her heart. She scarcely moved from his side throughout the day, for she was convinced he was going to die, was terrified that he would want her and she not be there, that he would die, as he had suffered all those hours, alone. . . .

It was much later in the day that she knew the Fates had let her off, that Charles was going to recover.

A week later he was well enough to leave London. When the doctor suggested that he should go to the pine country and mentioned Hindhead, she said: "No, Lodshott—it's only a little farther on. Over the border. I used to live there as a girl. There's an inn to stay at . . ."

They stayed in it until the March winds were done and the tender green of the silver birches waved beside the sea-green of the pines above the yellowing gorse and the dark patches of heather that later would cover the heath with a purple carpet. It was years since Virginia had been in this rolling evergreen country of the pines, and as she walked with Charles across the open common, up its ridges and down its vales, she thought of those days when she had met and walked with Stacey Russell as though it were something which belonged to another life. It seemed to concern neither her nor Charles. So much had happened since then: it was not Stacey Russell whose dead hand lay heavy upon her conscience. She could not think farther back than that first day of Charles's illness. That was the cruellest thing she had ever done in her life. She did not want to think about it. But there were whole hours in those days of his convalescence when she could think of nothing else, when she felt haunted by it.

"I'd never have forgiven myself if you'd died," she said to Charles one day when their time at Lodshott was drawing to a close.

Charles laughed.

"Why not? It was the crab, not you, that gave me ptomaine."

"But I left you."

"You didn't know I had ptomaine."

"I could see you oughtn't to be left. But I went, all the same."

Charles looked at her quietly, with that little suspicion of a

smile that was so much more often in his eyes than upon his mouth.

"Nonsense, my dear child, I didn't want you to stop."

"That was because you knew how much I wanted to go."

"Well? Why not? You were always keen on the Settlement."

"I shall never go there again as long as I live."

"Oh, I hope you will, my dear."

"Never—as long as I live."

"You're quixotic, my dear. What good could you have done by stopping with me?"

"This much. I could have got a doctor several hours earlier. Why . . . I could have got Maud Norman before I *went*."

"Come, come, Jinny, I won't have you developing a morbid conscience over me and my illness. It's the first I've ever had and I'm entitled to it. . . . Isn't it a nice night?"

"Lovely," said Virginia. There was a long silence before she said: "I never think the moon looks half so lovely as she does over Lodshott. I *can't* believe she doesn't move. *Look* at her. She's simply racing along—as though she had an urgent appointment at the other end of the sky."

Charles looked at her for a moment, his arm round Virginia's shoulders.

"Jinny—do you remember how still she stood that night over the orchard?"

"John Shelley's orchard? Yes. She's not so interested in us to-night. She's an affair of her own on. . . . Isn't it nice here? Charles, you *do* like it?"

"Very much."

Virginia laughed. "How scrupulously just you are, Charles, even to the scenery."

"What ought I to have said? 'Awfully'—or 'frightfully'? I was born at least fifteen years too soon for that, my dear. But it's all right, isn't it, being 'scrupulously just'?"

"It wouldn't be if that's all you were to *me*. You ought to hate me—and despise me. That's all I deserve."

"My darling Jinny, you're being anything but scrupulously just—to either of us . . . and a little silly into the bargain. Stop being a little silly, darling, and come here to me."

Virginia let herself be drawn within the circle of his arm.

"Jinny, are you sorry you married me?"

"No—never, never."

"Don't protest too much, my dear."

"Oh, Charles, honestly I'm not."

"Jinny . . . do you want me to leave you alone?"

She began to tremble.

"No, Charles," she said.

"You do like me enough for that?"

"Oh yes . . . infinitely," she said. "Oh, Charles, I like you . . . terribly."

He smiled and drew her closer. Jinny, leaning to the embrace, smiled too, because she knew he thought her adjective modern and meaningless and would not know that it did actually express the feeling she had for him.

IV

The cuckoo was calling across all the bright land when they went back to town, to settle down at last to a quiet life of their own, seeing their friends, giving and receiving invitations, going to the theatre, walking in the London parks and reading *The Doctor's Dilemma*, *Puck of Pook's Hill*, *Traffics and Discoveries* (and getting excited about the story in that volume called *Wireless*, especially Charles) and *The Dynasts*, *Memoirs of My Dead Life*, *Riches and Poverty*, *Valerie Upton*, *The Helpmate* and *Religion of Women* (about which they argued a little), *Whom God Hath Joined* and many others. Virginia did not go to the Settlement again and Charles had not referred to it. The Normans came, once or twice, to dinner, and once or twice she went to Marne House to tea: sometimes the Norman children, with Shane Mostyn, came to see her, and once she went out to see Shane's father at Forest Gate. He was ill again and at home—so much he had told her in the note which answered a letter of hers asking him to dinner. But he was more difficult even than before, and obviously in wretched health. He did not, he said, want to come to see her: he did not want to meet her husband. "You might just as well have married me as him," he said. "Any man would have done, and I shouldn't have been here long to worry you."

She did not see him again. He died a few weeks later—she never could understand quite what had been the matter. He seemed, so she was told afterwards, never to have recovered from the chill he had sustained in the previous summer, and cold had succeeded cold throughout the winter until now he was dead.

But to Virginia his malady was akin to that which had taken off her aunt at forty-four. He had died simply because it was too much trouble to try to recover.

Charles would not let her go to the funeral, but he went himself, and made inquiries for her about the boy.

"The Normans are looking after him," he reported. "He's to live at Marne House and go down to St. Paul's with Mark. He's clever, they tell me, and will inherit a little money under his mother's will when he comes of age. . . . I hope that satisfies you."

Virginia said: "Yes, thank you, Charles. It was good of you to bother. We must have Shane here sometimes. He's a nice boy. I hope our son will be half as nice."

"Virginia! Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I wasn't sure . . . I only went to see Maud this morning."

"When is it to be?"

"In time for Christmas. November. A wretched month to get born in. I wish we'd managed it better for him."

"He won't mind," Charles said, feeling how right his instinct had been about that unfortunate young man's funeral. Young wives ought not to go to funerals.

"Charles—do you *want* children? I mean, does it matter terribly whether we have them or not?"

"My dear, everybody in love wants children."

"Ah, yes," said Virginia, and took his hand in hers and closed the other over it.

V

Her son was born on the last day of November nineteen-seven. She did not suffer unduly at his birth and she meant to have other children. Charles wanted children. Here was one thing, at least, which she could do for him. His pleasure in the child she found infinitely touching—and his pleasure in her decision that he must be named after him.

"We can call him Carl," she said, "if you think two Charleses in the family too much."

"He will want a second name. What about Frank?" said Charles.

A little colour came up in her face, very pale and of a waxen loveliness these days that immediately succeeded the baby's arrival.

"It makes a horrid combination, Charles Frank Frome," she said quietly.

"Add something else."

"Two names are enough for any child. Let's make it Norman instead of Frank. That'll take in Eve as well, won't it?"

Charles didn't say it wouldn't.

"Charles Norman Frome. All right."

Eve and Frank, obviously touched, came to see mother and son. Queer, Virginia thought, how even the most unlikely people were pleased to have children named after them. Charles Norman Frome was a good baby and did not object to visitors. He lay and slept or watched their faces with grave wide eyes. Eve said she expected Virginia would be glad when he began to grow up. She was when *hers* did. Babies weren't really interesting, merely absorbing. A pity they took so long—both to appear and get established. Eve, however, who had so obviously taken motherhood in her stride, was not entirely obsessed by the marvel of Virginia's performance. She wanted Virginia, when she was about again, to try to find time to come to some of her drawing-room meetings, which were getting a little stormy since all these disputes about militancy had started. Eve disliked militancy, and Frank, of course, was merely being provoking when he tried to find a logical basis for it. Frank laughed and asked Virginia to bring the baby to show the children. "They're fearfully interested. Especially Shane and Mona."

"Shane and Mona," said Eve, "might be brother and sister. They like the same things—the wrong things, I think. Always daubing about with paint and clay and practising their everlasting duets. The idea of Shane being Mark's chum seems to have gone by the board."

"Shane's weakness," said Frank, "is Eve."

"What nonsense!" said Eve, and suddenly recollecting that she had a Committee Meeting at half-past five, gathered her belongings together and prepared to depart.

"And Eve's weakness," said Frank, "is Shane."

Eve laughed.

"More nonsense!" she said. "But he really *is* a nice boy—a lot more thoughtful than Mark! He remembers your likes and dislikes—and your birthday *before* he's spent all his pocket-money, which Mark never manages to do. And he's enthusiastic

about things—even my drawing-room meetings, which Mark loathes.”

Frank said: “Mark holds a watching brief for life and can’t quite believe it’s the simple affair we grown-ups try to pretend it is.”

Again Eve laughed. “Well, I’m sure it isn’t as complicated as Mark thinks. Nothing could be. . . . Virginia, my dear, we must go. I’m glad all this is over so satisfactorily. Take care of yourself.” She kissed Virginia on the brow, twiddled one of Charles Norman Frome’s crumpled fingers and moved away.

Frank did not kiss her. He stood looking down at her for a second or two, then put a hand on her shoulder.

“Bye, Jinny,” he said. “Tell me when I have to perform in this ceremony of Charles’s, won’t you? And hurry up and get about again.”

Charles had decided that his son must be christened. Virginia, who had no views about this kind of thing one way or the other and had consented to be married in church for the same reason, had acquiesced. But when he had suggested that Frank Norman should be one of the godfathers, she had objected that he didn’t go to church. “Neither do I. And neither do you.”

“Not yet,” Charles had said, “but I expect you’ll agree with me later on that you can’t set children too good an example.”

Virginia had looked at him quietly and said nothing. A new Charles . . .

She lay still when her visitors had gone. There was a warm glow at her heart, which very slowly faded out, leaving a strange little ache.



CHAPTER TWO

I

By the time his son was four months old, Charles had arrived at a feeling of satisfaction and stability about his marriage that had its roots in Virginia's sweetness of temper, her sense of humour, the commonality of their interests and in Virginia's "open mind." Not that, upon occasion, Charles did not find that a little aggravating. He was aware that certain adherences of his had surprised her. She had certainly been surprised (and, he thought, a little amused) to discover that he wanted to be married in church, and that, for all he so seldom went to it, he considered himself a member of the Church of England. Still more had she seemed surprised (and more definitely amused) by his membership of an official parliamentary party. Virginia belonged to that section of society which is not moved to "join" things, and Charles's attempts to make a good Liberal of her were as unsuccessful as those to make her a good Churchwoman. She was, he saw, entirely unimpressed by the machinery of party politics to which he introduced her, and her scorn flicked lightly, in passing, at the "mediævalism" of parliamentary procedure, which was Virginia's description, and not his. Politics she persisted in regarding as a game, and her sole interest in the vote and in Eve Norman's drawing-room meetings was that she saw no reason why men should keep it to themselves. Charles, relieved that she took this subject of female suffrage a good deal less seriously than Eve and her friends, and a little exhausted by his efforts to explain his Party's attitude upon the subject, was none the less definitely dissatisfied that her attitude to politics generally should be so "flippant."

He was, however, repeatedly struck by the serious critically-minded mood she brought to her reading; and by her catholicity of taste. She had none of the text-book knowledge which, in various forms, he read and heard a dozen times a day. Her opinion was always her own—not culled from Bagehot, Arnold or Raleigh. When he gave her *Essays in Criticism* to read, she shook her head over Arnold as a critic, saying that he had not sufficient sympathy, but she liked him for saying that poetry

should, at bottom, be a criticism of life. And though Charles tried to persuade her that her finding against Arnold upon the lack of sympathy was but an indication of her own tendency to too much, he found her expression of it an altogether exhilarating thing. He had been marking the essays of London University Extension students that evening, and the accepted and expected point of view he had found particularly wearisome.

"I wish you were one of my students," he said suddenly to Virginia, and laughed at her good-natured "So I am."

"Not in this subject. . . . I can't tell you much about the things you've read. I can only tell you what other people think—or what *I* think, and your opinion is at least as sound as any of ours. You've got what so few people have—a naturally critical mind."

She smiled at him, pleased that he praised her.

"If you've finished, come out and look at the night. There's a nice moon."

He got up from his chair and came over to her side at the open window.

"*Is the night chilly and dark?*" he asked, as he put an arm around her.

"*The night is chilly, but not dark,*" she replied, and laughed a little and stood there looking at the almost full moon in a rather cold and windy sky. She felt pleased and happy, and pleasantly in tune, as she had done that first time he had asked her that question and heard her reply. Queer, she thought then, as she thought now, that the mutual knowledge of a beautiful poem should make one feel that God was really in His heaven. . . .

II

To this quiet period of married happiness Virginia's daughter belonged. She was born in the March of nineteen-nine, and Virginia sometimes felt that she was the first child she had, and her heart was torn with regret when she looked at Carl because she felt she had somehow cheated him of something he should have, which would be his sister's and never, never as long as he lived, his.

Vicky's brother, Randall, was born fifteen months later, and two years after that another sister appeared upon the scene, but stayed only long enough to receive the name of Shelley and

exchange long clothes for short, as though she did not think very much of this world of strikes and war into which she had come hurrying. Shelley represented the last of Virginia's endeavours to found a family. She was thirty and not too easily reconciled to Charles's decision that she should have no more children. Three, she said, was an awkward number. The middle one always had a thin time of it. Charles had laughed at that, as if it amused him to think of Vicky having a thin time, ever. Her very name amused him—Victoria Mary, after his mother and a governess Virginia had had as a child. Virginia, with no relations of her own, showed, he thought, a quite unnecessary delight in his, of which she—and he—knew very little. His father had died just as he had left Winchester, and his mother had very promptly married again. It was a fortunate marriage for her family, for the new husband had a large income and no objection to spending a certain amount of it upon another man's children. Charles had completed his education without any hitch and his younger brothers had done the same. His sisters, he said, had not been educated: they had married. They were a disunited family, seldom meeting, the others sharing little in common with Charles, whom they regarded as dull and scholarly, and, in particular, not sharing his liking for a settled occupation, which kept him in England, which country, they said, wasn't fit to live in three-parts of the year. But it happened that Charles's mother had been in England just before and at the time of Vicky's birth, and, money being no object, and flowers, in such circumstances, a simple way of winning popularity, Victoria Garstin became very popular indeed, and went back to her villa on the French Riviera leaving behind her an avalanche of flowers in Virginia's room, an immense enthusiasm in her breast and a steady determination in her heart to give her name (which Victoria Garstin herself thought slightly ridiculous) to her little daughter.

Charles, who had not seen his mother for six or seven years and did not expect to see her for another such period, was immensely amused, and told Virginia, laughing, that he thought she found it a lot easier to have children than to find names for them. Virginia laughed, too.

"Vicky's quite a pretty name," she said, "and suits her, somehow. Besides, she'll get nice birthday presents."

Charles went on laughing.

"That remains to be seen," he said. "It's out of sight out of mind, I'm afraid, with mother—though I admit you're not an easy person to forget."

With the second boy Virginia had taken a short way by giving him Charles's second name and leaving it at that, but what moved Virginia to call her second daughter Shelley she never admitted. Shelley was her favourite poet, she said darkly, when questioned about it, and Sylvia, who had raised slightly disapproving eyebrows at "Charles Norman" and never really (Virginia knew) believed it was Charles's choice, shrugged her shoulders at the puzzle. Virginia was aware that Sylvia took less interest in the appearance of her babies than she would have done if she had not gone out of her way to impress upon her in the first place that her reasons for marrying Charles at all were mainly biological. The surface of their friendship remained unruffled, but quietly, ever so slightly, Sylvia had withdrawn. Virginia, unable to explain the situation to herself, happy with Charles, yet for ever on her guard in her meetings with Frank, with her mind steeled everlastingly against the treacherous sweetness of that February night when Charles had so nearly died, knew quite well that she could not explain it either to Sylvia. Perhaps she hoped that Sylvia, one day, would see for herself that she was happy, that either her life was too full for the romantic dreams and posturings of earlier days or that the fright of that February night had shaken her back to common sense. Her acquaintance with Frank Norman had fallen into place: they shared a friendship that warmed her heart even though she knew the secret places of his life were bare of all thought of her. She was satisfied to have it so.

She took her maternity a lot less seriously, she found, than Charles took his paternity. Perhaps she laughed at his solemnity only because she was a little afraid of it; but Charles knew that she was these days a much less serious person than the Virginia to whom he had proposed. And so did Virginia, who knew, too, that her children gave back to her something, at least, of the youth which had been filched from her. To Charles, watching her with them, hearing her voice as she read to them, sang or told them stories, she seemed like a child herself. She looked very young: there was nothing matronly about her, yet her maternity he knew, and she knew, too, was the crown of her life.

As her children grew older she began to understand, however, that Charles, as a father, would do a great deal for his children but would expect a good deal, too. He would erect standards, demand attainments, allegiances. He would give them opportunities, but he would expect something done with them. They would not be dropped, like coloured beads, into their hands merely to keep them amused. He was, on the whole, she thought, rather like Eve Norman, who set standards so high for her children, that, according to Mark, they would for ever be prevented from doing anything even moderately well. Mark had failed his matriculation in nineteen-eleven and again in nineteen-twelve, and to his mother's intense disappointment had been absorbed into a London shipping office. "Mother," as Mona said, "is perfectly splendid, but she does expect such a lot!"

Charles, Virginia thought, would expect a lot, too. She began to see that what he had considered "fine" in Eve she was going to find considerably less "fine" in Charles, for she did not want her children dragooned, even into happiness—Charles's idea of happiness. She began to understand that what she wanted most of all for them was that they should be happy after their own fashion. She wanted for them all the happiness she had missed in her own youth. She believed that only by heaping happiness upon them could she prevent them from making the kind of blunder into which she, at seventeen, had stumbled. Charles's talk of standards and ideals went a little over her head. After all, it wasn't that she had been lacking in "standards," and in "ideals" she abounded. What she had lacked was happiness, purely and simply happiness, and there had come a moment when to get it she had been willing to knock all her "standards" about the head, and was not unaware that her "ideals," young, romantic, hot-headed things, had but assisted in the rout. No: happiness, freedom to develop their own personalities, was what she wanted for her children, what, if necessary, she meant to fight Charles to get for them. Dear Charles! It had not been necessary to fight him for much.

III

Other people's children interested her, too. Her house was always full of children—her juvenile parties became quite famous.

Sylvia's little son, Michael, now a sturdy youngster of ten, his sister, Anne, eleven months older than Carl, and Carl's little school-friends—Virginia kept open house for them all. She saw a good deal, too, of the young Normans, and of Shane Mostyn, until, in nineteen-twelve, he went to Germany. A different Shane came back, who left Marne House to share a studio in Chelsea with a young and wealthy man called Manistre whom he had met in Germany, a Shane who came less frequently to Campden Hill, and not often, Virginia gathered, to Marne House. When Mona complained, Eve said that she could not expect "that old brother and sister relationship to last for ever," and that Mona had *enough* young men, goodness knew. . . .

She certainly had—and to Eve's intense dissatisfaction. But Virginia welcomed them all. She knew, however, that to Mona none of them made up for Shane, who had gone to Leipsic to study music but had written a novel instead and a cycle of Elizabethan songs which Mona copied out in her beautiful script, renamed *Shane Mostyn's Farewell to Music* and sang sometimes at Campden Hill. At eighteen Mona Norman was lovely, fulfilling the promise of her childhood. With her hair newly-up she looked astonishingly mature, a maturity of appearance strangely at variance with the elusive, uncertain air she carried about with her, as though she reacted all the time, and violently, from her mother's unvarying certitude. Charles liked Mona and told Eve she should be ashamed of herself for letting her stand at the Marble Arch selling *The Vote*. But Eve had said proudly: "Why not? A girl brought up as Mona has been can do anything."

As early as all this, Virginia was vaguely sorry for Eve because she knew she was disappointed in Mark and Mona, because, already, she consoled herself for their failure with the hard jewel-like brightness of the young Judy, and because although mothers should not have favourites, mothers did—and Eve's favourite was Mona. She had wanted her, Virginia knew, to fulfil in her life some bright and lovely pattern of her mother's devising, and here was Mona engaged in making some strange, erratic modern design of her own. Hugging the fact of her children's youth, Virginia felt that though Charles would not have favourites he was none the less engaged in working out clever, careful designs which he would want them to spend their days weaving into the tapestry of life, and be as bitterly disappointed as Eve if they

made patterns of their own—or no patterns at all, perhaps. Alarm stole into her eyes sometimes as she looked at them, at the quiet, rather self-contained Carl, stubborn, not given to over-many words, an enormous contrast to the vivacious and mercurial Vicky, who would laugh, wouldn't she, in life's face whatever it did to her? Vicky was like Judy Norman, she would get what she set her heart upon. She'd not know when she was beaten. Neither, surely, would Carl, with that stubborn sensitive mouth of his; but whereas Vicky would lay about her with gusto and defiance, Carl would fight stubbornly, miserably, his back to the wall. . . .

Absurd to think such things about children as young as Carl or Vicky. As well think them about Rannie, too young as yet to do anything but laugh and crow and eat his food and wake her up at night and treat her and all the big world around him as one gigantic joke devised for his special enjoyment.

CHAPTER THREE

I

ONE fine morning in June Virginia, walking down the Kensington High Street, met Mona Norman, who stopped and said: "Hallo, Mrs. Frome. It's ages since we saw you. Father was only saying so yesterday. Do come and see us soon."

"But you haven't been to see me either, you know."

"That's true. I've been rather . . . *encumbered*," She laughed. "You see, I've been getting engaged—and then disengaged. It does take up rather too much time."

"I'm sure it does," said Virginia, and knew better than to ask the identity of the gentleman who had been so briefly accepted and dismissed. "I'll come in to tea one afternoon this week, if I may."

"I wish you would," said Mona. "Which? If you tell me I can see father doesn't fix up any appointments. And I'll get home early."

"Thursday, I think," said Virginia. "How is everybody?"
Mona wrinkled up her face.

"Mother's all right—she always is. Father's got a cold. He's very cross about it. So's mother. As a family, you see, we don't *get* colds. . . . It's against orders—mother's."

Virginia smiled.

"Don't be naughty, Mona."

"I feel it's my fault, though. I took father out last week and made him sit about in Kensington Gardens playing Father Confessor about Paul Harrison (it was Paul I was engaged to, you know) and it got a bit chilly; and then when we got home we went and looked at his apple-tree that was just coming into bloom."

His apple-tree. Virginia knew all about that—he had lived at Marne House all his life and had planted the apple-tree as a boy. She said nothing.

Mona said: "It's all very well for mother to say colds don't come from lowered bodily temperatures . . ."

Virginia laughed. "How's Shane?"

"All right. . . ." Mona's voice was listless, guarded, as it always was when she spoke of Shane.

"Are you all going away for Whitsun?"

"Except mother. Shane's going off somewhere with Garth, Judy and father are cycling to Fiveways to see Grandfather Bentley, and I'm going to stay with Greta Mardinor."

Greta was an old school-friend, recently married.

"Oh yes—Greta lives in the country now, doesn't she?"

"Letchmere. You go to it from Liverpool Street, which seems a pity."

Virginia stopped at Derry & Toms.

"I'm afraid I have to go in here," she said. "Carl has a birthday next week, and I want to order a rocking-horse in good time."

"Nice to be Carl. Good-bye!"

Mona smiled her adorable smile and was gone.

Virginia ordered her rocking-horse, and walked home through the afternoon sun thinking of Carl, who was soon to be four, and of that little girl who, next month, would have been two if she had lived. And of Charles, who'd not like to find her out when he came in. . . .

She went to tea at Marne House on the Thursday. Eve looked in casually upon them and took herself off. "Do try to persuade him, Jinny, to have a night off to-morrow. The Settlement will go on quite well without him. Besides, it's a holiday week-end, anyway."

"Holidays don't make any difference to my boys down there, unfortunately," said Frank. "I'm all right, Eve. A cold in the summer always seems more troublesome than at any other time."

"I'll go to the Settlement for you this week," said Virginia suddenly.

"That would be kind," Eve said. "You'd be much better in bed," she said to Frank as a parting shot, "but I know you won't stop there, with Mona catching the what-ever-it-is to Letchmere to-morrow morning."

Frank laughed.

"Oh, well," said Eve, "good-bye." She smiled and was gone.

"Mona's right," said Virginia presently. "The apple-tree is a lovely sight."

"In a London garden especially, yes," said Frank. "This one

was about a foot high when I planted it. I remember my father digging the hole. I forget where the tree came from. I was about seven, I suppose. So it must be about forty-six years old."

"Forty-six!"

"Yes. . . . I'm fifty-three this year."

"No!" said Virginia.

"Does it surprise you?"

"Very much indeed. You don't look fifty-anything."

"Not even with a summer cold? Well, it's true. I was born in 'sixty-one—in the midst of all that fuss about the seceding of the American States. In Liverpool, and Maud was born in the following autumn—in the middle of the Lancashire cotton famine."

Virginia remembered something Sylvia Shelley had told her of all this—of the young wife dead, the crèche started in her memory. . . .

"Fifty-three!" she said. "It's ridiculous! Surely Eve's a *lot* younger?"

"Fifty-one last January. She wouldn't mind your knowing. She's one of the women who don't lie about their age. She's never needed to, of course. . . . How old are you, Jinny?"

"Thirty-three this November."

"You don't really belong to our generation, my child. Queer you got mixed up with us all, the way you did."

"It was knowing Sylvia Shelley . . . and going to Stephanie House, I suppose. And marrying Charles; he's eight years older than I am, too. It's funny, but I don't seem to have any close friends of my own age."

"I've often wondered how you came to know Sylvia. You seemed suddenly to spring up from nowhere."

Virginia said: "So I did. And in the middle of what ought to have been Sylvia's honeymoon. Any other woman would have kicked me out. Did you know her first husband, Stacey Russell?"

"No, but I knew her first as Sylvia Russell, through Maud. Did you know him?"

"Yes. I met him when I was sixteen and a half. At seventeen I ran away with him to Italy. There were extenuating circumstances—but no woman but Sylvia would have believed it. I came to Sylvia when it was all over. I was really in great trouble . . . and she suggested Stephanie House, gave me her friendship

and let me share in yours. And later I married Charles."

She paused for a moment, looked down, looked up. "Charles doesn't know about Stacey," she said. "You see, I couldn't be sure he'd understand."

"He wouldn't," said Frank. "You'd have hurt him dreadfully."

"I knew that. I always felt he divides women into two classes, the chaste and the unchaste. I'd have hated Charles to have thought I was unchaste. I've never had any regrets about not telling him—I'd do anything, even now, to keep it from him if there were any chance of his hearing about it. But there isn't. . . . You don't think I ought to have told him?"

"Why should you have told him? What difference can it make? Men and women are queer creatures, and they make themselves unhappy over queer things. You love your husband. No man can ask more than that. Something which happened to you before you even knew he existed cannot really hurt *him*. Doesn't it all come back to tradition, to purely primitive feeling? Chastity and sex-morality are essays which have been written down too frequently by masculine pens. We accept too easily standards set up in earlier times. You are younger than I am, Jinny, and will live to see many changes. I envy you a little, I think."

Virginia said: "Would you mind very much if I told you about 'the extenuating circumstances.' I've often thought I'd like to tell you."

"Then I'd like to hear. . . . It belongs, somehow, to our friendship, doesn't it?"

"Ah, yes," Virginia said.

II

A long while afterwards Virginia said:

"It's been nice, this talk. I'm glad we've had it."

"So'm I. It's been a good friendship, ours."

"Oh, hasn't it . . . ?"

She stood up, looked at him for a moment, laughed a little at their absurd past tense and held out both her hands.

"Good-bye, do take care of yourself. And count on me to-morrow evening."

"If I'm no better I'd be very grateful."

"You don't need to be. Will that cold be well enough for you to come and dine with us next week?"

"Good lord, yes."

"All right. Let us make it Friday, to-morrow week. Drop me a line if you find you can't. No, don't come down . . . and don't ring—I can let myself out."

She left him standing at the top of the stairs. She turned once and saw him smiling down upon her. He raised his hand, as if in salute. The final salute.

Virginia never saw him alive again.

III

On the morning of Friday week Judy's voice on the telephone, terribly self-possessed, a little defiant, even of the last enemy.

"I've got dreadful news. . . . Father died at twelve o'clock this morning. . . . No, only since Wednesday. . . . He got out of his bed to keep some appointment. . . . I don't know. Double pneumonia, the doctor says. Yes, Mark's here. . . . No, she wasn't coming home until to-morrow. We wired this morning, early. . . . She hasn't come yet. No, thanks very much. Mother's doing everything."

Virginia put down the telephone receiver and said in a thin, small voice that sounded hollow, as if the world had become an empty shell: "Frank Norman died this morning."

IV

It was Mona who told her about it.

"He got really ill on the Wednesday, and would get out of bed because of a wire from a cousin who was dying and wanted to see him. It's just the sort of thing father would do, but mother says he killed himself for Cousin Linda and that we didn't matter." She broke down and sobbed on Virginia's shoulder.

"You were fond of father, too," she said. "What are we going to do without him?"

"I don't know," said Virginia drearily, and her tears fell upon Mona's golden hair.

V

Charles said: "Is there anything I can do to comfort you, Jinny?" and watched, with strange pain at his heart, the heavy tears fall down and down her cheeks.

Virginia came and sat on a stool at his feet and put her wet face down on his knee.

"You do—just by being here, Charles."

"I hope I do, my darling."

"I'll get used to it presently—to the idea that he isn't here any more, that I'll never see him again. I can't feel like this for ever."

He let her cry.

She stopped presently, put up her arms and drew him down so that her face was against his.

"You've been very patient with me, Charles . . . for I think you've always known, haven't you?"

"Always, my darling."

"Before I married you?"

"Yes."

"And you *were* patient: you left me alone."

"I trusted you, Jinny, and I trusted your fundamental common sense. I knew I had only to wait. The thing you ultimately had was better, I think, than what you wanted, once."

"Infinitely better. . . . I must have been mad, just a little. I treated you very badly, Charles."

"It's over—long ago, Jinny."

"They *have* been good, these last three years?"

"Perfect, Jinny. . . ."

Never before had Charles said that of anything that was his. Always he under-estimated the things he valued as if for ever he must propitiate the jealous and watchful Fates.

"Oh, Charles, *that* comforts me," Virginia said.

But she went on crying, none the less.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

At first Virginia could not believe in the war. War was associated in her mind with a long string of unfamiliar names which had stuck in her consciousness, she found, like signposts along a forgotten road. Isandula, Rorke's Drift, Majuba Hill. . . . When people talked of aggressor and aggressed she remembered only that long ago some one had told her that modern wars were not made that way. When Charles talked of the war she was only aware of the blood pounding in her brain and the knowledge stalking through it that this war, as had another, years earlier, would take her man away from her.

Charles was forty, and might well, even with his patriotic ardour, have been excused for staying behind, at least in those early months. But by Christmas he had put his house in order and had gone off to train on Salisbury Plain, and in the following spring Virginia let her house in Kensington and went off with her children to the country.

Charles came down to her in the late summer, on leave for foreign service. He had nothing to say upon this business of being a soldier—a soldier in the ranks, for he had refused to take a commission. He talked about the Wiltshire downs, about Stonehenge, and was enthusiastic about Greece, for which country he was under orders. Greece, to Charles, meant Athens—the Parthenon, the Acropolis, the sun on marble and the red cyclamen in May. "And a ubiquitous tram-service," Virginia said, but she smiled, believing that Greece, even modern Greece, was better in the summer of nineteen-fifteen than France.

But there were days when the war touched her personally not at all, when her part, and Charles's, in the holocaust ceased to matter, and there pressed upon her all the burdens of a thousand years of suspicion, folly and intrigue which had brought the world to this.

"O God, won't it ever end?" she cried, and a long procession of tortured men and women filed drearily through her mind. "Victims of the past," she said, "all of us—dying and suffering

for an ancient tale of wrong."

But Charles, his nerves fretted and frayed by the sudden cessation of all the things that had made up life for him, turned abruptly to her with that expression on his face which made her take him in her arms as if he, too, were a child and come into the country to find comfort and peace with her. In the days that followed, she closed her eyes to misery and devoted herself to giving Charles something worth while—of peace, herself—that he might take with him to the place where neither peace nor she would be. Out of those seven short days and nights she made for him a world in which briefly he took refuge, in which the dream for once wiped out the business of life.

The Fates were generous and gave them fine weather, but Time stayed nothing of his pace for them. The lovely tramping out-of-door days, the quiet hours with their children and the warm nights lighted by a moon that shone on them through a tangle of leafage from beech and birch and pine, went by with lightning speed. At night, the little house was their own: it took them to its heart and comforted them, gave them nights of passion and of quiet love to store up against the empty ones ahead and took their troubled hearts and shook them free of their sorrows and fears, gave them joys deep and tender to harbour warmly against Time, against Eternity. It seemed to Virginia that she had wasted all her life with Charles until now—and suddenly the end of all things was rushing upon them, like calamity down the mountain side.

With Charles gone, the world she had made for him faded like a mirage: reality stared at her and the knowledge that joy was at an end drew cold steel across her heart.

That first evening even Vicky was quiet, as if she understood that her mother had other things with which to concern herself than the events which had happened to her own important person that day. She did not bother for stories when, after tea, Virginia went and sat out on the little verandah that looked away across the sloping woods. There would be no moon that night: the racing clouds would shut it back. For a week it had shone steadily for them, had lighted them down the sweet ways of love grown sure and full, and now it would not intrude upon her loneliness. But there was a pale light shining beneath the white stems of the silver birches in the little wood, and already a few stars showed tangled in their golden-tinged leafage waving ever

so lightly against the sky. She sat there not knowing that she was cold, not even aware that she was trying to hide from the night, from the empty night that waited for her, swept clean even of sleep—from all the empty sleepless nights that lay in wait for her.

It was Carl who came and brought her a wrap, Carl who put an arm around her neck and thought she ought to come in. And as she laid her face for a moment against the little hand upon her shoulder she smiled because he said no more than that. Nobody had ever heard Carl utter six words where one would do.

She went in and they made room for her round the newly-lighted fire and were very sweet and kind and loving to her. And all the time her heart was torn with pity for Charles because he was missing all this, the freshness of this early world of youth that belonged to their children. Fate had served him a scurvy trick, was robbing him of the best years of his children's lives. Always she would cherish at her heart a remembrance in which he would have no share. And for the first time that evening there was born within her the knowledge that now was Charles's time with his children, that never again would he appreciate or understand them as he would whilst they were very young.

II

Charles wrote to her not from Athens but from Salonika, painting for her a city of minarets which "reminded you how recently the town had been Turkish," with a long rambling fort and surrounding walls; a long steep street that ran up through the centre of the town and bazaar, narrowing as it went; a city of dust, bad roads (which the British, however, were improving) and presently of heat that, as the year advanced, became unbearable. A city of flies, then, to Virginia, of flies and dirt and incipient disease, a nightmare town in a mad world, with the British forces operating on something they called "the Salonika front," crossing the Struma and using the first "tanks." The war was a nameless horror which sat for ever in her heart, that must be endured but must not be talked about.

She used afterwards to think that she could never have borne it but for the children, who took her mind off modern Greece and Charles who had been swallowed up by it. Of those last few days with Charles she thought with intolerable longing. They

were like the closing pages of a story more utterly real and absorbing than any other she could hope to meet. She could not believe that Fate would offer her again so lovely a girdle of days. All her soul cried out for normality, for the ordinary things of life. She had never asked for more than that, had feared so often that these things never would be hers. To have had them—to have lost them so soon! She was convinced from the first that nothing, when the war was over, would ever be the same again.

By the beginning of nineteen-sixteen it seemed to her that the war had swallowed up everybody. Eve Norman had added war-work to her other activities, Maud had taken a Nursing Unit to Serbia under the ægis of the French Government; Sylvia and John Shelley had turned their Cornish house into a convalescent home for wounded soldiers, and Sylvia lived and worked there whilst John had gone to one of the base hospitals. Mark, Shane, all Mona's young men friends were in some part of the far-flung British Army, or kicked their heels upon some training-ground. As if from boredom Mona Norman had got herself engaged to one of them, the young and fortunate Garth Manistre. Virginia thought of him always as fortunate: even the war made no difference, for he seemed to like it. Perhaps because it had yielded the lovely Mona to his embraces. It was Charles, acquainted with this piece of news in one of Virginia's letters, who wrote: "I thought it was Shane Mostyn, not his friend, she liked." Virginia had thought so, too, and was secretly disturbed by this engagement; but Mona, dividing her time between her grandfather's new house in Surrey and her work in the studio at the bottom of the garden which she had persuaded him to let Garth build for her, because "mother had brought the war into the house," had little time to go visiting and seldom got as far as Virginia's country cottage. Her letters were few, brief, cynical and mocking, and Virginia knew that she, too, hated the war with passion, that her nerves were eternally frayed and fretted by it. She had only seen Mona with Garth Manistre once since they had become engaged, but it had seemed to her then that he, too, had that effect upon her. It was the night before Garth had left for France and Eve had given a dinner-party for which Virginia had journeyed especially to town. She had stayed the night at Marne House and could not sleep. It was May, and Frank Norman's apple-tree was in full bloom.

She got out of bed and stood at the open window looking down upon it. The quiet night was filled with moonlight and with the white beauty of Frank's tree. As she thought of him a passionate thankfulness rose suddenly in her breast. "I'm glad you died," she thought. "You'd have hated this," and stood there suddenly rigid with the swift, blind misery that the thought of the war always brought upon her. Across her mind, filled still, incongruously, with the beauty of Frank's tree, came running the memory of Charles's last letter from Salonika . . . flies and dust and heat and malaria and infective jaundice . . . and the peace and coolness of the English spring night fell across her heart like a lash. Her courage drooped beneath it. She leant her head against the window-frame and cried and cried. . . .

The very tiniest sound startled her into hurried composure. She turned, expecting her door to open and Eve, calm-eyed, level-headed as ever, to come in. But the house was quiet, wrapped in sleep. Turning again to the garden, she saw that a light had been turned up in the studio beneath the apple-tree and that the door had opened to let out a dark figure, clearly discernible in the moonlight as Garth Manistre's. He shut it behind him with a repetition of the same soft click with which its opening had arrested her attention. She watched him walk quickly away up the garden-path and listened for the sound of the closing gate, but it did not come. Garth must have closed it very carefully. A little while later the studio light went out, the door opened again and Mona moved out into the moonlight. Behind her the door clicked with a distinctness that knew nothing of caution. There, for a moment beneath the apple-tree, she stood quite still, her hands—very white, like her face, in the moonlight—crossed upon her breast, as if she would still the very beating of her heart to catch some sound afar, very faint and elusive. Then, with a little falling of the hands and a movement suggestive of shrugged shoulders that oddly contradicted the mournful gesture of the hands, she turned and came up the path to the house.

Something out of the dead past rose up and walked quickly and quietly through Virginia's mind. She drew back into the room and got into bed. But not to sleep.

By the time she was down next morning Mona was already shut up in the studio with her work, and there Virginia went presently to wish her good-bye. There was about her a shadowy, exhausted look that went to Virginia's heart. They sat together

and talked for a little while, and it was Mona who asked if she had any news of Shane.

"No," said Virginia. "Have you?"

Mona shook her head.

"Nothing; he's forgotten us. There's a girl in the offing, you know. . . ."

Virginia did know. Eve had told her all about that. Somebody called Patricia—Patricia Ramsden. She was married, but she used her maiden-name and had long ago left her husband. Not for Shane, though, Eve believed. He'd met her in Switzerland where he'd been holiday-making when the war broke out. Goodness alone knew, said Eve, speaking with the exasperation that the sex vagaries of men and women invariably induced in her, what their relations were now. But Virginia knew—the look on Mona's shadowy face had told her.

"I don't like her any better than mother," she said, "but I can understand why Shane does. In a way she's a kind of refuge. She doesn't get hurt—at least, not by the same things that hurt Shane. I do. And what explains Shane and Patricia explains me and Garth, too, I suppose . . . though I probably wouldn't have known that but for the war. That's changed everything. . . I don't see, do you, how things can ever be the same again?"

III

So far as Charles and she were concerned, Virginia knew from the first that they were not. The new world the war had flung at her feet, spitted on a sword, was not the kind of place which helped her to feel that after all the dreadful business had been worth while or served a purpose. She had not expected it to do that, but she knew that Charles had, that the time he had spent in Greece had been one long disillusionment and that his early months in post-war England had underlined the whole of it. He had believed the British people upheld by that nobility of purpose which so early had sent him into the war, and he turned in sick loathing from this post-war world which hastened to get rich upon the necessities of war-driven humanity, in which Morality, as he said, had turned her face to the wall, in which men and women everywhere lived in a state of reckless extravagance as if never again did they expect to pay bills or to present them. He turned to Virginia as if she were the one sound thing

left to him in a sick world; but even as she strove to make up to him, she knew that it was impossible. The war had dug a hole in which most of Charles's illusions and beliefs had been buried away out of sight; and of the things that were left to him—his life with Virginia and his children, his work—he seemed a little afraid. Never again, she knew, would he use that word "perfect" of anything whatsoever, not of his life with her, nor of that with his children nor of his work. Things were always "not too bad," or "better than he had expected," as if everlastingly he saw the jealous Fates at his elbow ready to pounce and snatch. Charles's contentment and happiness were definitely to be numbered among the war casualties. She accepted this without repining, for in her heart she had always believed that it would be so. The old life together was finished: she did not look back, but from the first occupied herself in making the new one as smooth and pleasant for Charles as she could.

It was not too easy a task. For that first year Charles's health, to start with, was a wretched affair. He had had jaundice in Salonika and had not properly recovered from it, and he limped still from an old wound in his knee. Their circumstances, too, were a good deal less comfortable. Charles had gone back to the University, but several of his most lucrative lectureships had passed into other hands. He no longer went to the fashionable girls' school at Ascot. Virginia's five hundred, which before the war had given a comfortable margin, had dwindled to a little over three and showed small sign of recovery for many years. In common with the rest of the world which had not been engaged during the past few years in making things of use to a country at war, or in buying and selling houses and in letting rooms, they were distinctly the poorer, and the problem of the education of three children, Virginia could see, troubled Charles already. But by engaging a cook-general and doing some part of the housework herself, she contrived to make him feel that at least there was no immediate cause for financial anxiety.

By the autumn of nineteen-nineteen, however, Charles's health had definitely improved, and she had just succeeded, as she thought, in getting him fitted somehow into the new scheme of things when his mother came back on a short visit from France. With her came her young granddaughter Phyl, Charles's youngest brother's child, a mature young person of sixteen, and

a girl of about Vicky's age, called Terry Wakefield, whom Mrs. Garstin had brought over to deliver up with Phyl to the school at Ascot where Charles had been used, once a week, to lecture.

Virginia was amused by Phyl, so excessively mature, so outrageously self-possessed in her smart abbreviated clothes, with her rouged cheeks and lips, but Charles found her "quite horrible." She too, it seemed, was to go to Ascot—to be "finished"—whereas the youthful Terry was apparently to be "begun." When Vicky, very full of herself, these days, and with eyes rounded with admiration and delight for this marvellous apparition that was Phyl Frome, got a little muddled and said that she was going to Ascot to be "finished off," Charles said that he thought that was the best thing that could happen to her. Virginia laughed because, in her way—this new rather surprising way that she was learning to accept but which Charles found revolting—the young Phyl was undoubtedly lovely. To Charles, however, used to Virginia's brown-pink cheeks and hair still bright and sunny despite her thirty-seven years, beauty that you got out of a box was not beauty at all. Neither would he admit that Phyl, apart from the box, had any beauty whatsoever, though that was manifestly absurd, for she had excellent features and eyes that, though they were a little hard and calculating, were lovely in shape and colour. And she was idiotically like Charles, too, which Charles's mother pointed out—to his intense indignation.

"This post-war young woman I detest," Charles said, as though that ended the argument. "Why, in the old days if a girl had come in to one of my lectures at Ascot like that I'd have sent her out to wash her face!"

Virginia laughed and said that was very likely what would happen to Phyl at the hands of his successor, but she added: "You know, Charles, make-up isn't *really* a modern thing. Go back and read your Restoration drama, my dear."

"Bah!" said Charles, who loathed Restoration drama, "fashionable, useless women!"

"Like me!" said Charles's mother, sixty-eight and not looking it, who had certainly done nothing with her life but enjoy it, unless, as she said now, marrying a wealthy man just when it looked as though they must all head for the workhouse could be counted as a "useful" work. Thinking of Charles and Charles's education, Virginia said it certainly could.

The young Phyl knew that her uncle disapproved of her and teased him by showing more knee even than usual in his presence and by making more display with her cigarette-case. "I didn't think there were any men like you *left*," she said calmly and without the least intention of being rude, but contemplating him with that steady gaze she knew he found infuriating. Only Virginia knew that it annoyed her when Charles, openly invited, refused to take her to the theatre.

"I wouldn't be seen dead with you, unless you wash your face," he said, treating her to a little of her own cold contemplation so that, for once, she turned away in confusion that was no less that because the plaster, as Charles called it, on her face prevented it from changing colour.

IV

Terry's proper name, it seemed, was Terrence, and she, too, Virginia thought with a smile, had parents who presumably preferred girls to be called by boys' names. She was an only child of wealthy English parents who had, however, always lived in France. Soon after her birth they had separated and Terry had divided her young life between the two of them. In the second year of the war her father had been killed and since then she had lived with her mother. But now her mother wanted to marry again. "And so," said Terry simply, "I have to go to school." Virginia was struck by the lack of criticism in the young voice. Resenting nothing, she took it for granted that school was the natural solution of this family problem. She would go home for some of the holidays, but she seemed pleased when Virginia promised Charles's mother to look after her upon those occasions when she did not. She had been left a good deal to herself, Mrs. Garstin said, and Virginia would find her self-reliant and not at all "demanding." She would inherit several hundred a year from her father when she came of age, and Charles's mother understood that he had made ample provision for her in every way.

Virginia, who liked the look of the young Terry, said that of course she would do all she could. She felt a little sorry for the girl—so young, so really young, less than a year older than Vicky—pushed away from home into a strange country so that her mother's second honeymoon should not be interrupted.

But Terry, a soft-eyed, gentle child, was not aware that she was being pitied, nor knew herself in need of it. Going to school was nicer than having a step-father, and she'd always wanted to come to England. And besides, Phyl would be there.

By the way Terry looked at the elder girl, Virginia knew that at the moment Terry's one idea of complete success was to become as much like Phyl as possible. That made Virginia smile; for no two people could be more dissimilar—it wasn't only that Phyl was six years older, excessively fair and marcelle-waved, while Terry was extremely dark, with black eyes and a pure olive face, from which the hair was brushed straight back and hung in two long pigtails down her back; it was something fundamentally at variance between them. Even as early as all this that was plain to Virginia, who felt for Terry the quick sympathy that in her was always so near the surface for the unwanted child, and who saw that Phyl had no intention of seeing very much of the young adoring Terry during the two or three years when they would be together at Ascot.

"You must come and see us as often as you can," she said kindly, when the final good-byes were said, and Charles grunted afterwards: "I hope that doesn't mean we've got to see Phyl as well."

Virginia said darkly she thought Phyl would not be looking for friends and places to visit.

V

With the departure of Charles's mother and that of her young protégées to school, Virginia was at liberty to consider the news about Mona Norman, who had, Eve said, been secretly married to Shane Mostyn in March and was going to have a baby in December.

Disgust edging his voice, Charles said: "Good God! March? Why, that young man she was engaged to was only killed on Armistice Day! She hasn't lost much time."

Virginia went to tea at Marne House and found Eve "seeing about a flat for Mona and Shane." For Eve, it seemed, recognized the principle that young married people should live together and would not hear of Mona continuing to live any longer at Marne House. It was Judy who supplied these facts, a long-legged, short-haired Judy, going down to King's each day and

working for her degree and looking at the world with wide, unafraid eyes.

Mona, it appeared, had got married secretly because her mother had insisted that for decency's sake she must wait a year. "For Garth to get properly cold in his grave, I suppose," the young Judy said. "But that's silly, because although Mona was engaged to Garth it was always Shane she wanted."

Virginia said: "Don't you think Mona cared about Garth *at all*?"

"Oh yes, in one way she did, I suppose. He attracted her. I daresay he'd have been all right for her if it hadn't been for Shane. She didn't want Garth 'for keeps,' you know. It was always Shane she was soppy about, even as a kid!"

"But, Judy, she was going to marry Garth if he had lived!"

"Don't you believe it!" said the young Judy and laughed and lit a cigarette.

Across Virginia's mind there slipped, once again, that thin pale memory of the past. She watched Judy in silence, vaguely relieved to discover that her interest in her sister's emotions concerning two men had abruptly ceased.

"I want to talk to you about Stephanie House," she said. "You were there years ago, weren't you? Aunt Maud wants me to go there next year, when I've got my B.Sc., and look round a bit. Mother wants me to be a doctor, but I don't know. . . . I don't think I'd like fussing about with sick people. . . . What did *you* do at Stephanie House? Do tell me."

Virginia did.

"I don't know . . . it doesn't sound too bad," Judy said at the end of it. "I'll have a look at it next year. Mother's keen on it, and I suppose *one* of us has to do something to please her. She's got a disappointing lot of children."

"Nonsense!" said Virginia.

Judy laughed.

"Oh, I know *you* think we're a decent lot, but you're not mother. She expects a lot more than you. Mark she regards as a complete failure, and she's not keen on Mona 'petering out,' as she calls it, in marriage so early. Besides, she didn't want Mona to marry Shane, despite his D.S.O. No number of D.S.O.'s, for mother, could wipe out that affair with Patricia whatever-her-name-is."

Eve, when she came in, contradicted this view in no wise.

Definitely, she *was* disappointed in her children. Mark, who hated his shipping-office more than ever since the war, now talked of joining his cousin on some farm or other, if you please, in Canada. And as for Mona, Virginia understood that she would never quite forgive her for her deception, and knew that Judy was right when she declared that Shane's military honour had not obliterated that interlude with another man's wife. It was, she saw, not an interlude at all, to Eve, but evidence of character. Again that shadow of things past and dead slipped over Virginia's mind. She was glad when the subject was exhausted, when Eve said: "What about your own news? I hear you've been up to your eyes in in-laws?"

But listening to Eve's comments upon her recital of Charles's dislike of modern youth as exemplified in his young niece Phyl, she thought: "They *are* alike. They haven't adapted their standards one scrap."

Mona came in presently, dressed for the theatre and lovelier than ever, looking as though somebody had lighted a torch inside her.

"I wish I'd known you were here. I haven't a moment now. Shane's taking me to see *Home and Beauty* and we're going to the Ivy first for dinner."

"Come and have dinner with us next week," said Virginia. "And bring Shane, if he'll come. It's a long while since we've seen either of you."

"Here *is* Shane," said Mona.

Shane came into the room. Tall, lithe, brown, with that same charm of manner Virginia remembered in him as a child and in his father before him. Something casual and easy about him that was very attractive, something free and emancipated. An elf-like person, incongruous enough in all the civilization that radiated from Eve Norman.

"Love to come," he said in reply to Virginia's repeated invitation. "How are the youngsters? Grown up?"

"Getting on," said Virginia. "Carl is twelve this year and Rannie nine. Vicky was ten in March."

"Good lord!" said Shane, as one recognizing a miracle. "And how's Charles?"

"Better—lots better, but terribly anti-social. He goes nowhere. It will do him good to see you, and Mona will gladden his eyesight after the artificial young niece to whom we've just

said good-bye."

Shane's eyes turned to Mona's face. Their eyes met. A long quiet look passed between them. They smiled.

"Do forgive us, but we really do have to fly," Shane said.

"Come to the studio one afternoon, Virginia," Mona said. "I'm doing a bust of Shane for next year's Academy and sitting bores him."

"Lovely little liar, aren't you?" said Shane, but a shadow passed over his face and a faint colour came into Mona's.

"How do you think she's looking?" Eve asked when they had gone. "A little pale?"

"Oh, but that alabaster look belongs to her."

"Yes. I'm glad she thinks so, too. . . . I must confess I hate this modern rouge business. I agree with Charles. I never have been able to understand why respectable women should go out of their way to look like prostitutes."

Virginia laughed.

"You sound dreadfully *like* Charles, you know, Eve. Really, the number of times I've heard that ugly word during the last month. . . ."

She wondered whether she would be able to persuade Eve to come to dinner with Shane and Mona. She was aware that she wanted to give Charles a little moral support.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

FOR the three years which succeeded the ending of the war, Virginia lived a life of quiet domestic happiness, broken by nothing save the occasional ailments of her three children and the persistently bad nerves of her husband. If romance had gone out of her life, something curiously satisfying had come to take its place, and that, surely, was as it should be. The children loved her: Charles relied upon her, accepting her judgments, interfering with the upbringing of their children only to the extent of insisting that they went occasionally to church and of thoroughly scanning their school reports. If he was disappointed that Carl cared more for science than literature he did not say so, though he grew occasionally sarcastic over Rannie's excessive zeal for sport. It was, on the whole, a happy family to which Terry Wakefield came for at least two school holidays out of the three each year, and in it she speedily found her place. Charles approved of her, the children liked her—even the silent Carl who still retained his passion for making two words do the work of twelve, and between Vicky and Terry there sprang up a friendship interrupted scarcely at all by the long terms at school. Rannie taught her to bowl and improved her game at tennis. The Shelleys asked her sometimes to join the party when the young Fromes were planning to spend a holiday in Cornwall. In short, Terry was everybody's favourite.

Sylvia's eldest son, Michael, a tall, nice-looking boy, very like his father, was already working as a student at one of the London hospitals. The mere sight of him brought Virginia up with a start, for it seemed only yesterday that she had gone to see him as a baby of a few days old. Anne, his young sister, born just a week before her own marriage, marked the passage of time for Virginia less dramatically, for there was five years' difference between brother and sister, and Anne was still a leggy schoolgirl, very nice to look at, with smooth, regular features and a demure expression (too demure, Virginia sometimes thought). She was like her mother, a smaller, less striking edition, and with something that Virginia valued left out. Everybody said that

Anne was "such a dear": and Charles, in particular, approved of her, but Virginia was aware that Anne was one of the people she never thought of unless she happened to be present and knew that she considered her a surprising kind of daughter for Sylvia Shelley to have had. Half an hour with Anne, however, was sufficient to make her feel more than a little resigned to the mischievous Vicky, whose more tiresome escapades she sometimes found it necessary to keep from Charles. There was the Saturday afternoon when she persuaded Rannie to go with her on a voyage of discovery to East London because she liked the sound of the names—Bethnal Green, Cambridge Heath, London Fields, and frightened her mother almost to death by not reaching home before midnight because funds had given out and they had to walk all the way from Liverpool Street. And there was the afternoon when she had played truant because she had suddenly decided that life was not worth living unless she could see Nijinsky dance at the Coliseum. It was Vicky, too, Virginia always thought, though both Rannie and she denied it, who was responsible for that day when Rannie was nearly drowned at Porteath. Certainly he had no right to have been bathing at that spot, and Virginia had not forgotten that a certain amount of persuasion had been necessary, earlier in the holiday, to convince Vicky that to do so was strictly against the rules. Carl, it seemed, had gone to his brother's rescue but had got into difficulties, and it was Terry who had plunged in and saved the situation. Luckily that promising young student Michael Shelley was in the house and had rendered first aid, so that Virginia, coming down that day to fetch them home on the morrow, had arrived in time to find Rannie well over the stage of fright and already entered upon that of thrilled participator. Anne had missed all the fun by having hysterics and being sent to bed, but Vicky quite plainly thought it the most sporting event of Rannie's career. Lovely of him to afford everybody so much excitement. "Poor Anne," said Virginia, "I didn't think the modern girl went in for hysterics." Michael laughed and said: "Go in for anything," but Sylvia said only, and very quickly: "Anne isn't modern, bless her."

Vicky, who didn't care very much for Anne and was annoyed at being out of it all, addressed herself to Terry.

"Weren't you frightened at *all*?" she wanted to know.

And Terry said: "Not until I saw Carl couldn't do it. . . ."

Rannie snorted indignantly.

"It didn't matter, I suppose, about *my* being drowned?"

"Not so much," said Terry.

Everybody laughed, including Virginia, who thought it was just a deliberately teasing answer until she saw the confusion on Terry's face. In the middle of the laughter Carl came in.

"Joke?" he said, but showed no further interest when Sylvia said, in her kindly fashion: "I don't think there is one. We're all a little light-headed, I fancy. . . ."

II

It was during the hot summer of nineteen-twenty-one that Mona's small son died of some obscure throat trouble whilst she was away with him in the country. Nobody saw very much of either her or Shane in the months that immediately succeeded this miserable event, but their public manners were so good nobody could possibly have suspected the trouble between them, and their public achievements strengthened the illusion that it did not exist. Success had come to Shane, via America, soon after the birth of his son, which another novel had cemented, and in the Spring of 'twenty-two he had a successful play running at one of the London theatres. In that same Spring Mona showed two exquisite pieces of sculpture at several of the Exhibitions, one of them a study of her little dead son. She worked hard for her mother's Parliamentary candidature in the autumn, and yet managed to have two water-colours hung at one of the autumn shows.

So quietly, so naturally, indeed, did these things happen that the news of Shane's citation as co-respondent in the divorce which Patricia Ramsden's husband obtained against her in nineteen-twenty-two fell like a bombshell among their friends. Eve made no secret of the fact that she was urging Mona to take advantage of the evidence of "desertion" with which Shane had had the decency to provide her to secure a divorce for herself, and no secret either of her exasperation that she evinced, as yet, no disposition to do anything of the kind.

"Why can't she leave the girl alone?" the young Phyl, who happened to be staying with the Fromes at the time, inquired. "If she doesn't want to divorce her husband, why should she? P'r'aps she likes him, anyway, whatever he does."

One afternoon in June, on the way to her grandfather's house in Surrey, whither she was fleeing in white and weary disgust, Mona came in unexpectedly to see Virginia. Her face was as pale as the frock she wore: her eyes were heavy and about her there was that shadowy exhausted look which always, when she saw it, tore at Virginia's heart. She sat quiet, aware that Mona wanted to say to her things she had found it impossible to say to her mother, that she had, indeed, come for that purpose.

She didn't want, Virginia learned presently, to divorce Shane, and Patricia didn't want to marry him. Patricia had merely wanted her freedom. Mean of her to have used Shane—but that was *her* fault, Mona said. If she hadn't gone off into the country, leaving Shane alone in town so long, it wouldn't have happened. There were husbands you could do this with, but Shane wasn't one of them. She ought to have known. Shane had no reserves—he always hated to be left. . . . It was just bad luck that he should just then have met Patricia again at somebody's house.

"They always attracted each other. Even from the first, when they met in Switzerland and went on to Italy together. I knew all about that—it wouldn't have kept me from marrying Shane—even if I'd had any right to throw stones—I mean, if there hadn't been Garth. . . . You knew all about that, didn't you?"

"I guessed, I think," said Virginia.

"I always thought you did. It began on the night he left England first and it went on until within a month of his death. Then Shane came home and I wanted to die. I *knew* that I'd never want anybody but Shane again as long as ever I lived. . . . And I spoilt it all by telling him about Garth!"

Virginia sat very still. She said nothing. There was a pain in her breast and her hand stole up and pressed hard upon it.

"It's that which has spoilt our marriage, not Patricia," Mona said. "It's at the back of everything, all the time. I wish I'd kept it to myself."

She gave way at that and cried bitterly on Virginia's shoulder and sat up presently to say: "I'm sorry to have been a nuisance—but somehow I felt you'd understand. I don't know why. Perhaps because father liked you—he'd have understood, too," and went away looking more exhausted and shadowy than ever.

Virginia thought continually of that little bitter outburst.

'It's spoilt our lives. . . . 'It's at the back of everything, all the time. I wish I'd kept it to myself.'

A little trickle of relief ran through her brain. So long ago—an old, old story. What place had it, what place could it possibly have, in her happy life of to-day?

BOOK FOUR

CHAPTER ONE

I

DURING the next few years nothing happened to Virginia that is worth recording. Charles's health and the family exchequer continued to show a slight upward tendency. Their children were growing up. Carl was at Tonbridge, where Rannie was soon to go: Vicky was at Bedford College. Science rather than literature continued to interest Carl, whilst Rannie's concern with life still tended to be bounded by wickets and goals, and Vicky dashed into all things with the zest that is willing to try everything once. The young Phyl, "finished off" long ago, had gone back to France in 'twenty-one, and thither in the Spring of 'twenty-four, Terry Wakefield followed. Virginia, who had a soft place in her heart for both girls, welcomed Phyl's departure with a certain relief because it removed the problem of the "modern girl" from Charles's immediate contemplation; but saying good-bye to Terry was rather a wrench. Terry had not wanted to go back; but for some reason or other her mother had insisted, and Terry, a slim, brown young creature, a few months short of her seventeenth birthday, obeyed. For weeks the whole household reeled from the blow of her departure, then the ordinary affairs of life closed up and restored its equilibrium. The young Fromes vowed they would ask Terry often to come to stay with them. When she was twenty-one, said Vicky, no one could stop her from living in London if she really wanted to. But the two invitations that Virginia sent to France during the next six months proved of no avail. On both occasions there was some quite insuperable reason why Terry could not come.

In the summer of nineteen-twenty-five, Anne Shelley, fresh from Roedean, became engaged and was married shortly afterwards. Ten months later Sylvia came to tea to announce herself a grandmother. Virginia looked at her and laughed.

"It's ridiculous," she said. "You look about thirty-five."

"Rubbish! It's the short hair—and our juvenile fashions. I'm fifty-seven. You're quite a baby, by comparison."

"I'm forty-four," said Virginia quietly, and added: "Life goes very fast."

"When one is happy," said Sylvia. "I'm sometimes afraid to think how happy I am."

Virginia started.

"Why, yes," she said, "I believe I am, too."

Yet what could interrupt the steady flow of that quiet, satisfying life that was hers with Charles and the children? Some day, of course, her children would get married, as Anne had done, or go away, as had Mark Norman; but though she did not want that day to come she knew it was not the fear of that which now so surprisingly knocked at her heart.

For the first time she understood that attitude of Charles towards his possessions, that propitiatory air with which he conducted his admissions of happiness.

II

Virginia's friendship with the Normans was restricted, these days, to hurried glimpses of an Eve given over to social and political activities. She had failed to capture a seat at the 'twenty-four election, but intended some day to sit in the House, and Charles and she had duly voted for her. Judy alone remained now at Marne House, but she, Virginia felt, embarked upon a medical career and doing well in her examinations, must have consoled Eve for many things—for the loss of Mark to the farm in Canada and for Mona's return to Shane. She had gone back to him in the summer of 'twenty-three, had borne him another son and had gone to live in Italy. Eve disapproved strongly of the whole thing. Shane, she said, was unstable and would always give trouble, and for answer Mona had quietly removed herself and the man she loved from the range of her mother's disapproval. Virginia thought that if Mona was not happy, she was a lot less miserable with Shane than without him, and that she was working, the appearance in the London Exhibitions of some lovely Italian landscapes gave ample evidence. Virginia had bought one of them, *Nightpiece*, for a birthday of Charles's, and every time she looked at it her heart was quickened with the pity and beauty of something once worth while and long dear. The thought of Mona and Shane out there in that deep Italian night touched her profoundly, and she spoke

of them to Eve with a depth of sympathy and understanding that Eve was far from appreciating and inclined to dismiss as sentimental.

It was in 'twenty-six that Virginia found herself face to face with the problems of a family rapidly approaching maturity. Rannie's reports from Tonbridge caused the first real dissension in the household, but Rannie, eternally good-tempered, was very little disturbed. Carl had settled his own fate whilst his parents were still discussing it. (Could they or could they not afford to send him to Oxford?) He did not want to go to Oxford. He wanted to be allowed to go to the Royal College of Science and take his B.Sc. He wanted, he said, to be a biologist. Charles had given way, relieved to discover that at least the boy knew what he wanted.

Vicky, even more than Rannie, was the storm-centre of the family, for she had left school without matriculating. She had failed her first attempt and had no intention, she said, of sitting again. Matriculation was not going to be of any use to her. She intended to go in for dancing.

Charles raged and fumed, forbade her to go to the public dancing-hall, and blamed Virginia for her earlier insistence that of course the child must learn dancing like all the other girls. Girls liked to dance, she said: she knew, for she had been a girl and Charles hadn't. She had been very miserable when at seventeen she couldn't dance as much as a step of the waltz. There was no reason why she shouldn't sometimes go to a dance-hall with Carl or with some one of her own young men friends. There was no harm in dancing, *per se*.

Charles poured scorn upon the modern dance, upon a generation that was content to take its dances from the niggers, via New York and Paris. The cold anger of the old Puritans that had swept across England, closing the theatres and destroying art treasures, seized upon him when Vicky, laughing, and for his especial benefit, twiddled her feet in the Charleston, or waggled her slim hips in something she assured him was called "the Black Bottom." Carl was no Puritan and Vicky's jiggings amused him, but he did not care much to do them himself. Squirring his young sister at dances he found a great bore, and Vicky, fond as she was of her brother, found it rather a bore, too. She preferred to go with Michael Shelley or some of the medical students to whom he had introduced her, or with any of her own numerous

young men friends; but every time she went there was a mild scene with Charles, who objected to his daughter coming home at one in the morning with these young men in their noisy cars. Vicky complained bitterly to her mother. Charles had always been so proud of his daughter and his sudden disapproval of her was a bitter blow to the girl. The fight between them was obstinate and prolonged. He objected to her clothes, detested her modern jargon and censured her reading. When she cut off her lovely honey-coloured hair, as a *quid pro quo* he cut off her pocket-money. In short, and despite Virginia's efforts, for six months he made her life miserable. Then that incalculable old woman, her godmother, sent her an invitation to go out to Cannes and enjoy herself. Phyl was there and Terry, and both were most anxious to see her. The mention of Phyl was to Charles as a red rag to a bull. He accused Virginia of having engineered the invitation. He worked himself up into a rage, finally decreed that Vicky should not go, and wrote an angry letter to his mother which evidently amused that lady, for she wrote again at once, pressing her invitation and reminding Charles of a certain gentleman known to history as Canute.

For the first time in her life Virginia firmly opposed her husband.

"Let her go, Charles. She's only at a loose end here. She won't come to any harm. I know Vicky."

It took her three weeks to move Charles. But in the end she got her way. Ungraciously enough he lifted his ban.

"If anything comes of it—any harm—I shall hold you responsible," he said.

It was a responsibility Virginia accepted cheerfully enough; but touched by the unhappiness she read in his face, she came and put her arm through his.

"Charles, *don't*. It's all right—really it is. We oughtn't to stand in their way. They're entitled to their happiness."

"They think they're entitled to everything. This is a selfish, headlong generation. It takes everything for granted. Especially your sex. The war was simply something fought for women—to give them a vote, which they don't know how to use, and freedom, which they abuse."

"They'll learn," said Virginia. "And you're wrong. The war didn't give women votes and partial emancipation—it merely hurried them up. It's about the only thing you can write down

in its favour."

"These young women don't know—and don't care—what these things cost. Vicky doesn't."

"Why should she, at seventeen? At seventeen, you know, Charles, one *doesn't*. Things *can't* cost too much." She sighed and put her arm through his. "Come out and look at the night."

An echo of the past came to her lips as she stood at his side on the little balcony beyond their window. "*Is the night chilly and dark?*" she said softly. "Years since you asked me that—or supplied the answer."

"I asked Carl the other night. He said: 'No, not very.'"

Virginia laughed.

So did Charles.

"Don't suppose that young man's ever heard of Coleridge," he grunted.

III

So Vicky went to Cannes.

She was a brief but regular correspondent. Her letters were the stark skeleton of her impressions—and she had neither the temperament, as Virginia knew, nor the time to attempt any clothing of the bare bones with flesh. But her letters were, none the less, live commentaries upon her new surroundings, shrewd, observant and level-headed. She had arrived in time for Phyl's wedding—to a Frenchman, named Hallé. He was rich, quite good-looking, and his other names were Jean Paul. Vicky didn't fancy him as a husband herself: he had too roving an eye, but Phyl seemed not to mind, and hinted that in France it was a mannerism not restricted to one sex, though why that should make it any better . . . ! Phyl, in Vicky's opinion, was lovelier than ever, and Jean Paul entirely approved of the make-up (really, father was *quite* behind the times!). She had seen very little, so far, of Terry, who spent most of her time refusing the men her mother found for her to marry. She didn't seem very happy: "dressing-up and gadding about didn't suit her. She wanted a 'job.'" Dressing-up and gadding about, however, was all that was required, it seemed, of the women Vicky was meeting.

It was early May when Vicky had gone out: by the end of June she was talking about bringing Terry back with her and of their opening a Dancing Academy together. By the beginning of

July this scheme—and Terry with it—had dropped clean out of Vicky's letters, which became oddly impersonal, sternly concerned with the scenery and with books she had read. A little later some queer adult generalizations crept into them—they became pensive little essays upon life as seen in a fashionable seaside resort by young and modern seventeen. They got back, via Terry's mother, whom Vicky seemed cordially to dislike, to the fashionable women.

"They hammer away everlastingly on one note—male and female created He them. They never stop remembering their bloomin' sex for one blessed moment—they're women all the time. In the ordinary sense they don't wear any clothes. I mean, their clothes don't *hide* anything—far from it. I went to a theatre the other night, with a party, and happened to say to my hostess that it would really be decenter if the actresses wore nothing at all. She said there were places where they didn't if I preferred it, and told the man sitting at my side I wanted to go to one of them—and asked him to take me! Father, of course, would say this is the 'modern woman,' but it isn't. I rather fancy this kind of woman—Terry's mother and her friends and half Phyl's—has always been the same. All down the ages she must have cast the same languishing glances at men: and I bet she said: 'Aren't you *wonderful*?', without meaning it in the least, to every man that's looked at her. She hasn't changed a bit—and have men, do you think, when it comes to women? It's a gloomy thought. Or am I growing cynical? Perhaps it's this constant parade of vanity against vanity—the female variety against the male. I don't know which I hate the more."

Virginia, reading this letter to a Charles who was having at this time a little trouble with his eyes and saving them as much as he could, suppressed the bit about the theatre. One had to go carefully with Charles, let him down lightly. But Virginia's belief in Vicky was strongly reinforced by what she wrote.

By September Terry was back again in Vicky's letters. Once more the Dancing School idea jiggled about in them. Phyl, "about to present Jean Paul with an heir—that ought to raise her stock with father!"—slipped out of them. Virginia suggested gently that perhaps it was time she came home. Vicky replied saying just when she would be coming and nothing, nothing at all about Terry. It was only right at the end that Virginia received a wire which said: *Terry and I reaching Dover six-thirty Friday*

please meet, and for a moment Virginia did not recognize the tall, slim girl who stood so quietly by Vicky's side. She had on a little hat pulled well over her eyes and the storm collar of her coat half hid her face, for the passage had been rather rough.

"Why, Terry, how you've *grown!*" said Virginia, taking her hands and kissing her. "I *am* glad to see you both."

Terry's sweet smile rewarded her.

"Have you been ill on the voyage?"

"No," they both assured her.

"Terry looks very pale. Have you got a headache?"

"Not in the least, thank you," Terry assured her.

"Well, we'll have dinner on the train, anyway. That will do you both good. Heavens, is that luggage *all* yours?"

"Ours," said Vicky. "About one-third is mine, though."

She hailed a porter and led the way to the Customs, looking very much the same Vicky to whom Virginia had said good-bye four months ago.

"The Dancing School scheme's off," Vicky said suddenly in the train. "Terry's going to put her money into hats instead."

Terry looked up quickly.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't put some into *your* scheme, too," she said.

Virginia looked up quickly, too, arrested by some note in their voices—in Vicky's, especially. Had they been quarrelling about it?

"Are you fond of millinery, my dear?"

"I like designing hats," Terry said, "if that's the same thing. I'm not sure. And I like designing frocks, too."

After that the conversation flagged a little, and Virginia, feeling that they must both be rather tired and that they could not be feeling quite so well as they imagined, settled herself in the corner and went on with her reading of *Jew Süß*.

CHAPTER TWO

I

So Terry came back into their lives.

She was nearly nineteen, very slim, very brown, very quiet. "As quiet as Carl," Virginia said, aware that already they liked each other. Both of them, she thought, treated words as if you bought them, with difficulty and pain, for so much a dozen. She tried to remember if Terry had really been as quiet as all this when she was a child, and decided in the negative. A quiet child, yes, not loquacious, but by no means silent. "She must be catching it from Carl," Virginia laughed. But it wasn't only that Terry had little to say: it was her capacity for quietness, for keeping still, that Virginia noted. Perhaps Vicky's quality of never keeping quiet if there was any excuse for doing the other thing accentuated this trait in Terry. But there it was, and it gave to her the kind of charm that went oddly in Vicky's noisy generation, and which, even without the fastidious charm of her straight regular features, the grace of her youthful limbs and the soft natural wave of her dark hair, neatly parted in the middle without a fringe, would have made her noticeable. She had none of the sparkling vivacity of Vicky, none of the insipid prettiness of Anne Shelley, now Anne Harvey; but she had a definite beauty of her own, cool and fastidious, like moonlight. And she knew—for already, at nineteen, she was an artist in such matters—exactly how to clothe it. She was the first person, professionally interested in clothes, whom Virginia had ever known to refrain from the adjective "smart" and to avoid its miserable implications. It amused Virginia to see how Charles, never done with his scorn of feminine fashions, accepted Terry's clothes without a murmur. Yet they were no longer, no less scanty than Vicky's or those of her friends. There was something about Terry, he said, which added several inches to her frocks; he implied, but being Charles he did not say, that Terry might wear a draped sack with perfect propriety and charm. She could wear what she liked—or nothing. It made no difference. Perhaps it was because she used no slang, because she had no "special way" for men, because she moved with so much cool

self-possession among her little crowd of admirers—or because of her delightful manners. Virginia didn't know, but she saw, not without amusement, that for Charles, Terry was bracketed with Anne. Anne was a cabbage, a pretty little cabbage with a small white heart. And as bloodless. The idea of Terry as a cabbage made Virginia smile. She was aware, too, of something of which Charles was not—that between Anne and Terry there was a fundamental antipathy. Terry's good manners tended to obliterate her share in it; but nothing obliterated Anne's. Virginia knew that cold, calculating look in Anne's dark eyes. It had punctuated all those early days with Vicky and their mutual friends.

Virginia was intrigued, too, more than a little, by Vicky's relationship with Terry. They were good friends; they went about together, they were interested in each other's movements and ideas, but every now and then there was something that arrested her attention, some quick betrayal of Vicky's patience, as if she came upon something in Terry which was stone to her exploring spade of friendship. It was there most frequently when books and plays or some ethical idea came drifting into the talk, and it appeared, markedly, after Maud Norman's article upon "Our Changing Morality" in one of the morning papers. Maud had taken the disproportion between the sexes and had endeavoured, with understanding, to put the case of the girl of to-day, aware of herself as a creature with sex needs, yet with small likelihood of marriage. Was she or was she not entitled to take what sex-life came her way? Was she to refrain from participating in one side of life because of the old taboos—social ostracism, fear of consequences, religious scruples, the old traditional talk of virginity? Was the whole of one side of life, for her, to be at the caprice of men? It was a strongly-argued article, frank, but informed by knowledge and tempered with insight. Society, Maud thought, would have to accept the changed standards, would come to see that it was better to do this than to condemn a million women to an unwanted celibacy—that it had racially far less serious consequences. You might think it a pity and perhaps it was; but it was the natural corollary of a civilization that would still have its wars and could not sufficiently bestir itself to deal effectively with its infant mortality problem.

Charles said that Maud ought to be ashamed of herself, and a

lot of other people seemed to agree with him, to judge by the letters published in the next morning's paper. Carl said shortly: "No virtue in virginity, *per se*," which shocked Charles considerably; there were words on the lips of this modern generation he could not bear to hear, but which seemed quite right and proper, Virginia thought, on those of a budding biologist. Virginia had long understood that Carl, theoretically, at least, was quite intimately acquainted with the phenomenon of sex.

Terry said nothing until Virginia directly appealed to her, when she said: "It seems quite sensible to me. I don't see why we should make so much fuss about sex—it's only one little bit of life, after all. . . ."

Vicky stared at her for a minute, looked as though she were going to cry, said: "You don't *see* . . . you don't *see*!" and relapsed into dead silence.

Terry said: "Perhaps it is a little dense of me, darling, but I really don't."

Vicky said nothing.

Virginia said: "But I think Terry's right, Vicky. It is only a little bit of life—for normal people."

"*No reason!*" exploded Vicky. "Oh, that's what I can't understand—that she shouldn't *see* . . .!"

Virginia was puzzled. Vicky had so far paid no serious attention at all to sex. Life for her was full, at the moment, of other things. In essence, Virginia knew quite well, she agreed with Terry; all Virginia's efforts had gone to that end, and every day of Vicky's life was a tacit agreement of it. What was it, then, that Terry's simple statement so passionately offended in her?

That evening Anne Harvey came in after dinner. She was soon going to have another baby, but she looked very young and attractive in a clever frock of Terry's designing. Quite the lovely young mother of the magazine page, thought Virginia. At Anne's instigation the discussion started again. In that cold and over-sweet voice of hers that to Virginia was like an imperfectly-set jelly, she said:

"I think it's perfectly disgusting to write an article like that." She turned to Virginia. "Of course you and mother won't agree with me, but that I *can't* understand. I think you're both perfectly ridiculous about Miss Norman. . . . *Aren't* they, Uncle Charles?"

Virginia tactfully changed the conversation. But she wondered again how Sylvia Shelley could possibly have had such a daughter.

II

Three months after Terry's arrival in London the arrangements for what Charles called her bonnet shop were completed. She had found premises in Church Street, had painted the door green, and her own bold signature, executed in bronze, had been fixed in its place. In the window, on the opening day, she showed a couple of hats on a stand, and a jumper-suit of colours that harmonized with the large bowl of chrysanthemums that kept them company. Vicky and Virginia went there to tea that day, and later on Terry sold both the hats in the window. Very soon after that "Terry's" became definitely established. Terry speedily had six girls working for her and a growing clientèle. She made Vicky a dance-frock for her birthday in March, and designed for Virginia the only comfortable hat she had had, so she said, since the advent of the universal shingle. For Virginia still kept her hair upon her head. Anne, too, spent money with Terry. She had a good deal of it to spend and singularly little taste in clothes. Beneath the spell of those which Terry's wand evolved for her, Anne's antipathy, like her condition, went veiled and discreet.

Cannes, apparently, had for the moment suppressed Vicky's desire to have a Dancing School. Instead, to Charles's quite pathetic delight, she went down to King's each morning to attend a modern English course. She played tennis strenuously and by hook or by crook contrived to go dancing two nights a week.

Carl had settled down to his chosen studies and expected that year to take his B.Sc. Later, they thought, he might go to Germany for a year—to Heidelberg, perhaps. If Charles could get a year's lectureship in Germany they might go there too. Virginia had always wanted, she said, to see the Black Forest. Heidelberg, said Carl, was not near the Black Forest.

"Oh, Carl!" said Virginia.

"Not *my* fault," said Carl.

Rannie, as Charles put it, continued to knock balls about at Tonbridge, but managed to scrape through a term's work not too badly. Rannie surprised Virginia. Nothing troubled him.

He had never been known to lose his temper. Charles called him slack because he took life and enjoyed it, but Virginia was aware that he had a good deal of general ability, for he managed all the time to scrape through his terms decently enough when all the evidence went to show that he had done very little work. Rannie, she came to believe, had the brains of the family, though he discounted brains and all forms of intellectualism. He was a Pagan, a Hedonist: he'd had a good time from the moment he was born, and he'd go on having one all his life. Virginia was aware that she knew Rannie better than she'd ever know Carl: he was altogether a much simpler proposition. He had none of Carl's shell-like propensities; he put no disturbing value on words: he used them with a careless freedom that offended his father; he gave no hint of reticences unfathomed and unfathomable. He was nice to look at, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, and his good health was positively aggressive. In the spring of 'twenty-seven he passed his Matriculation and came home to announce that he was glad they were pleased about that because he'd only bothered "to please the old man." Matriculation, however, wouldn't be of much use to him because he was going into the motor trade. Rannie was a true child of the age. He thought the future was in machinery, and as he wanted a place in the future, *ergo* . . . He had learned already to drive: he talked learnedly about the insides of cars, their habits and dispositions. When Charles said: "Motor-cars! Look at London!" he said: "What's the matter with it?" and laughed. He liked towns and noise and bustle. He worshipped at the shrine of speed. He liked getting about only if it could be done quickly. He refused to be frightened by his father's picture of the results of mechanical progress—industrialism eating farther and farther into the country, noise, rivalry, war. . . . Couldn't be helped, said Rannie. This was a mechanical age, and if you were born in it, no use pretending you were living in the twelfth century. Make the best of it, even if you hated it—which he didn't. What was the alternative, anyway? The Guild system? With a population of forty-five millions?

Charles gave in. He and Virginia between them bought Rannie a share in a motor business in Long Acre, and within a week he had sold Terry a de Soto six. Terry, it seemed, had driven a car in France and had always meant to have one in England. Rannie had wormed this out of her before he had

been in the house two days. He also told John and Sylvia Shelley that it was time they had a new car, and made up to Anne, who shuddered prettily away from the thought of "driving in all that." "Bloody little fool!" said Rannie, and turned his attention to her young and absurdly wealthy husband. Anne was chagrined. Terry, very excited about the de Soto, laughed at Rannie and allowed him to drive her down in it one Sunday morning to Richmond, but after that decided that she understood as much about it as he did, and upon her next trip took Carl with her instead of Rannie. Carl had no feeling for machinery at all; but from the number of times he went out in the de Soto, Anne said, you'd never have guessed it.

This remark arrested Virginia's attention, as it was probably meant to do. She had often wondered what would happen to Carl when he one day became aware that there were girls other than Vicky and Anne, whom he had taken for granted, in the world. Would he wake up one day and fall in love, like Titania, with the first person his eyes rested upon?

Anne's remark and something which happened a little later helped her to realize that he had already opened them to some purpose upon the young and lovely Terry.

III

Mrs. Garstin, Charles's mother, chose this summer to come to England again—ostensibly to see Terry and to find out what her clever fingers could do in the clothing of her old bones. She wanted several frocks and a couple of hats—and she wanted them quickly, as she had always wanted most things. She consented to trust herself to the de Soto, and was good-natured about Rannie's determined attempts to sell her one of her own, though equally determined that he should do nothing of the kind.

"Come out and see me, some time," she said. "I'll find you a rich and charming wife."

"Thanks most awfully," said Rannie, "only that's the kind of thing I rather fancy I can manage for myself."

The old lady grinned. "Nice boy, that," she said to his mother. "Refreshingly unlike Charles. Takes after you, my dear. . . . By the way, what do you think of Terry?"

"We're all very fond of her."

"Specially Carl, I think."

"No, I *hadn't* thought so. Why?"

"They're great friends, aren't they?"

"*Good* friends, certainly. They're rather alike in some things, of course."

"Anne seems to think . . ."

Virginia reflected that over this recent business of the camouflaging of the coming of her second baby, Anne had seen a good deal, lately, of Terry. She said quietly:

"What does *Anne* know about it?"

"Well, that Carl spends a good deal of his time doing things for her—at the shop and at this flat she's just acquired."

"Well, why not?"

"And that she's teaching him to drive her car."

"Why not?" said Virginia again.

"Oh, no reason—no reason at all why not. Our little Anne is romantic."

"Very," said Virginia.

"She misses nothing. She has sharp eyes."

"Very," said Virginia again.

The old lady smiled.

"And Vicky? Still dancing?"

"No, not so much. There's a certain amount of literature, at the moment, at King's."

"*Really?* I suppose she couldn't tear herself away for a little while to come back with me and Anne?"

"Anne? You're taking Anne?"

"Yes. I thought it would be nice for her. She needs a change. That baby made rather a nuisance of himself and she isn't feeding him."

Virginia thought she knew who had put the idea of this trip into her head. Charles. Anne had been very envious of Vicky's visit to Cannes, she knew. Charles must have told his mother how much Anne, too, would like to go. And yet, said something within Virginia, when Vicky . . . Oh, well, he must have seen for himself that Vicky's visit had had none of the ill effects he had so dismally prospected. In a way his suggestion about Anne was an acknowledgment of her own point of view. Virginia said politely to her mother-in-law that she hoped Anne would have a good time and come back quite recovered.

She was not prepared for the effect of the simple pronouncement of Anne's imminent departure upon Vicky. She made it as they were sitting down to dinner.

"What?" said that young woman. "*Anne?* Oh, damn!"

Charles considered her with a smile for which, Virginia knew, Vicky could have slain him.

"My dear child! You were keen enough upon your own expedition, if I remember aright."

"You do," snapped Vicky, "but this is different."

"Anybody would think," said Charles, who never knew, Virginia thought, when to leave a thing alone,—"*anybody* would think there was some reason why you didn't want Anne to go to Cannes."

Vicky, who seldom rose to this kind of bait, flushed hotly.

"There is," she said, and nothing more.

They were a small party that evening. Rannie and Carl were not coming in, and Terry, who had said she was, had not as yet put in an appearance. As she stirred her soup discreetly, Virginia stole a glance at Vicky's flushed face. She said quietly: "But Anne isn't going to Cannes. Your grandmother's at Antibes this season."

"Same thing," said Vicky.

The door opened and Terry came in. As she drew out her chair and sat down Vicky said: "Our revered grandmother is taking Anne back to France with her."

The two girls looked at each other. Virginia saw the very faintest possible shadow pass over Terry's face. She drew in her chair and sat down.

"How nice for her," she said. "Don't you wish you were going, too?"

"Yes," said Vicky savagely.

"Come, come, my dear," said Charles, "you've had your turn."

"Don't be idiotic, father. You don't imagine I'm *jealous* of Anne's going, do you?"

Over Charles's face there crept the look Virginia had seen so often on a man's face when a woman asked him that kind of question.

"No, my child," he said, "the evidence is all to the contrary."

Vicky subsided.

Out of the little silence Terry said quietly: "I hope Anne is going to let me make her frocks. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

I

ANNE was gone, her trunks full of the lovely new clothes Terry's clever brain had devised for her. Terry was very busy catching up the arrears, she said, caused by this mail order, and that of Mrs. Garstin, and making the final arrangements for the flat over the shop into which she intended very shortly to move. Vicky was reading the woman-haters, Tolstoi, Strindberg, and the result was apparently having a bad effect upon her temper. She complained that Strindberg wrote to a formula: in which the man was always a worthy, honest, generous fellow, the wife always incredibly shrewish, vulgar and idiotic. She held up to scorn the Strindbergian husband who painted his wife's pictures and saw that they got hung instead of his own; snapped her young tongue round the Strindbergian wife who spent the accruing cheques on the stupidest pastimes; curled a finger of scorn at the Strindbergian title: *The Comrades*. With cold disbelief she contemplated the author who got up so early in the morning whilst his wife and children still slept, the children who ran wild, the servants who read novels all day, the wife who squandered the money he laboured so hard to provide. From the picture of the father driven to madness by the bullying feminine conspiracy that formed his household her common sense revolted. She saw in Strindberg merely a man bound by his own nature to rebel continuously against everything that held him back from a complete and integral personal freedom. As though that kind of freedom existed, for any civilized person—as though any was entitled to it! Uncivilized and uncivilizable, she said of him, and Vicky liked civilization quite a lot. She liked things decent and in order. She was disgusted by Strindberg's quite poisonous hostility towards women, and quite unable to understand it except along the lines of this over-desire for freedom; for sex antagonism did not live in Vicky's heart. *The Kreutzer Sonata*, she said, made her sick, and she found that Charles was ready to agree with her there and to go some part at least of the way she went with its author. For Charles was among those who considered that the chief reason why Tolstoi

dressed as a peasant was because most of his friends did not. He thought most of his social reform contained a good deal of humbug, that his philosophy of life was vitiated by something fundamentally false, but he hoped that Vicky saw that he was a greater writer, a really great novelist. And Vicky wrinkled her nose. "Not about women," she said. "Not about the relationships of men and women."

"About Russian men and women, perhaps."

"Why? Are Russian women really so different?"

"Russian men, too, perhaps."

"Then why must we believe that Russian literature understands women better than any other? Only, surely, if we believe that women really *are* like that? To me, these writers only skim over the surface of feminine existence. I'll give you all the other Russians for Tchekhov."

"And yet there's a generation growing up in Russia to-day that does not believe such people as Tchekhov drew ever really existed."

Vicky sighed. This business of reconciling literature with life was very difficult. She began to believe it was an impossibility. She said: "Sometimes I think Eve Norman's right and that nearly all the novels of the world might as well have been written by men. The genuine woman's point of view is in hardly one of those written by women. Women-writers look at life through masculine spectacles."

He found her a few who didn't—a list that began with Mary Wortley Montagu and Charlotte Brontë and ended with Elizabeth Robins, Ray Strachey and Dorothy Richardson.

"Much too short," said Vicky, but the conversation cheered her. She thought: "I'm like father, deep down. I like order and decency, too—quite a lot of it. And I want women fine and splendid—not only as wives and mothers, but as human beings. It isn't the same."

II

Soon after Anne's departure Terry moved into the flat above her shop, and the Fromes saw rather less of her—with the exception of Carl, who saw rather more.

It was now an open secret that Carl and Terry spent a good deal of their leisure time together. The Frome children had always chosen their own friends, of either sex, and if Carl had, so

far, shown little interest in girls, he had to change sooner or later. Charles accepted this friendship without comment, seeing it as a natural and simple thing; and Virginia, for all Anne's babblings, did not give to it any undue importance. The only person who seemed to frown upon it was Vicky. Sometimes when she was with them Virginia found herself remembering that day when she had met the two girls at Dover. There was somehow still the same suggestion of some faint unacknowledged trouble between them. Virginia wondered what it was that had happened between them in France, what it was which had moved Vicky to so much feeling about Anne's visit there and about Terry's attitude to the point of view of Maud Norman's article—these and a hundred other things; but she was not disposed to worry over any of them. She believed in learning to trust her children, and then to leave them alone.

Nevertheless, the scrap of conversation between the two girls upon which she stumbled one afternoon soon after Anne's departure, was not calculated to make the continuance of this habit quite as easy as she would have liked. She was coming into the drawing-room and stopped on the threshold to examine a dent newly-arrived upon the freshly-painted door, which was very slightly open. Terry and Vicky were in there together, and the sound of their voices came to her very distinctly—Terry's quiet, puzzled, striving to sound indifferent.

"I don't see why she should."

Vicky's irritable, striving to sound reasonable:

"But suppose she *does*?"

"Then I can't help it."

"Oh, Terry . . .!"

"Well, what *is* there to do? . . . And why does it matter so much?"

"You don't *want* them to know?"

"I wouldn't mind your *mother* knowing."

"Terry—I do think you ought to . . . to regret . . ."

"I do—but not in your way—and not for your reasons."

Silence, in which Virginia felt that Vicky shrugged her shoulders. Then the sound of her voice again.

"Oh, well—I don't see how she *could*, anyway, after all you've done for her. Those frocks were lovely, Terry, the nicest of any you've ever done."

"I wanted her to look nice."

"Why—specially?"

Terry hesitated.

"No—not for that reason. No, please Vicky, *not* for that.

. . . I just hate to do anything badly."

"Even dressing Anne?"

"Well, Anne is very nice to dress—in to-day's clothes."

"You *are* queer, Terry!"

"Am I? . . . I wish you wouldn't worry about it, darling!"

(Darling was an unusual word on Terry's lips: it seemed to Virginia, used as she used it then, to hold an infinity of regret and tenderness.) There was a little silence again, then on a different note Terry said: "When are you going to start reading Paul Hervieux?"

Virginia came in and sat down.

"I'm sick of the Continental writers," Vicky was saying.

"I'm going back to a course of Charlotte Brontë. I'm tired of all this sex antagonism. And of the modern English novel, too. That's got an obsession about sex."

"Charlotte writes of sex, too."

"But how differently! Charlotte made sex—and passion—decent. She showed the Victorians how beastly they were about them. No wonder they detested her!"

Terry said: "I don't see why the novel shouldn't have what you call a sex obsession. If the world will have it that sex is so much more important than anything else, why shouldn't its novelists?"

"Why not, indeed?" said Virginia. "If the novel is the mirror of contemporary life, sex is certainly one of its problems."

Terry said, in that quiet but very clear voice of hers: "People will *have* it that it's a problem." She smiled at Virginia her sweet characteristic smile. Her face was empty of concern. She did not look like a young woman with a guilty secret. Virginia wondered what it was she "wouldn't mind" her knowing, and forgot to reply to what she said.

"Was there a sex problem when *you* were young, mother?" Vicky demanded.

"I dare say, but it wasn't talked about—perhaps that's why we talk too much about it to-day. There were only bad women and good women in my young day, very neatly and unmistakably differentiated. Privately, of course, people were very much what they are to-day—not many very good or very bad. All a little of each. . . . Have either of you heard from Anne?"

"Post cards," said the girls.

"Rather dull, mine," said Vicky. "But then, I wouldn't expect Anne to buy *real* photographs."

Virginia laughed and picked up her book, a long closely-written novel by Shane Mostyn which had just arrived. Virginia opened it and read: *To Mona, who has a gift for loving*, and at the end, *Varennna, Como: September, 1926*. She closed the book and laid it down upon her lap. Vicky reached over and took it up.

"Oh, Shane's new book. *Do* hurry up with it, mother. When did it come?"

"This morning."

"It's dedicated to Mona again . . . and so beautifully! How lovely to have a book dedicated to you! Varennna! Como! How exciting it sounds! Did you go to Varennna when you were in Italy, mother?"

"Why, yes," said Virginia. "I believe I did. But it's so long ago . . . and I never could remember Italian place-names."

"How long were you in Italy, Aunt Jinny?"

"About four months, I think."

"And never learnt any Italian," Vicky said. "You *must* have had a good time, darling, not to have had leisure for a single word!"

"How did one get into Italy all those years ago, Aunt Jinny, before the Simplon or St. Gothard tunnels were built?"

"Oh, you went round . . . by Genoa: or you went by diligence across the mountains."

"Which did you do?"

"Genoa—because it was cheaper. . . . And now, if you don't mind, my dears, I'm going to read."

"Mother never *will* tell us anything about that Italian holiday," Vicky complained. "Let's go out, Terry, shall we, before dinner?"

"I've promised Carl," said Terry. "Why not come, too?"

"No, rather not," said Vicky, and presently drifted away.

Ten minutes later Carl came in.

III

"Sit down for a moment," Virginia said, "while Terry puts on her hat."

Carl sat down a little reluctantly. Virginia began to talk and Carl answered with that sparseness of words which always made it seem as if the business of talking really hurt him. He had, Virginia thought, singularly little feeling for family life; he hated discussions; he never wanted to talk about books; the small events of the day did not amuse or interest him over-much. He was a decidedly self-contained and difficult young man to have for a son, Virginia decided. Looking at him to-day, tall, very loose-limbed, with his pale, well-cut face and mobile mouth, Virginia wondered if there was anything she really knew about him. He lived his own life and was never really near you: he was so independent, of her, of every one. Of every one but Terry. Shy and reticent as he was with other people, even with her, with Terry he was intimately at home. In her company he came alive, and words failed to be objects of suspicion and were comfortably converted into symbols of expression as they were, despite the cynics, to most other people. She had a sense of failure, sometimes, where Carl was concerned; as if she had cheated him of something his brother and sister had, as if in some way he did not belong to her at all, because he did not belong to that period of her life to which Vicky and Rannie did. Somehow or other Carl seemed whatever you did to remain outside it, even now.

"Ready," said Terry's voice in the doorway.

Carl sprang up. Virginia noticed once again the way he seemed suddenly to come alive at the sound of her voice. The look he bent upon her, the way he took her arm and turned away stayed in her mind for some time. Anne's eyes had not been so very sharp, after all. It was her own that had been so dull. Carl was only twenty and a student still. That he could fall in love had never occurred to her. And now that it had it seemed to her a little absurd. And absurd, also, to think anything Carl did as absurd. But she wished suddenly that she knew as much about him as did Terry.

"Dinner at eight," she said to them both. "Is that all right?"

It was Terry who answered.

"Quite. We won't be late."

Carl said: "Bye, mother . . ." and smiled at her. They both smiled at her. A sense of complete well-being slid unexpectedly into her soul. She made herself comfortable in her seat and settled down to a beginning of Shane's book.

IV

It did not surprise her when Charles said to her that night, as she brushed her hair before her glass: "Carl was good enough to inform me to-night that he and Terry wish to be recognized as unofficially engaged."

Virginia laughed.

"What on earth does that mean?" she asked. "Anything—or nothing?"

"Everything, I fancy. He agrees that he has no chance of marrying for years—that his trip to Germany and the other plans we've worked out provisionally for him are not to be interfered with. But he thinks—and apparently Terry thinks, too—that as they know their own minds they might as well tell us the truth."

"I can't see why they need have bothered to be so definite at so indefinite a stage," Virginia said, but knew that for all that she rather liked it. "But I don't see anything against it, do you? We like Terry, and money will be no obstacle, and they're both so young the idea of a long engagement isn't a thing either we or they need worry about."

Charles said impatiently: "Oh, it'll probably peter out when they're both a bit older and have seen a little more of the world."

Terry, Virginia reminded him, had already seen a fair amount of it.

"She's always had so much liberty and learned to depend upon herself, and your mother tells me she's had one or two very lucrative offers of marriage. I can't help feeling that Terry knows her own mind."

"Well, well," said Charles, "I suppose it's all right."

"I'm sure it is," said Virginia.

Charles lay in bed watching Virginia brush her hair that was still very little dimmed by time.

"How old are you, Jinny?" he asked suddenly.

"Forty-seven this year."

"Quite a youngster."

"Who has been married nearly twenty-two years."

"It doesn't seem so long."

"That's the nicest thing you've said to me for ages."

"Nonsense! Utter nonsense!"

Over the brushing of her hair Virginia smiled.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

ANNE HARVEY got back in London towards the end of September, and surprised the somewhat attenuated Frome household by turning up one evening after dinner. Carl was sleeping away from home that evening. Vicky had already gone out, and Virginia was just preparing to do so. Neither was there any chance of Terry's appearing, for she was out of London, "week-ending."

"But why didn't you ring up?" Virginia asked her. "I'm afraid there will be only Charles to entertain you."

Anne, however, didn't seem to mind, and indeed, as it afterwards turned out, this arrangement suited her purpose very well. Virginia was always quite convinced that she had selected her evening with some care.

As it happened that night, Vicky's escort deposited her at her father's gate rather earlier than usual. She let herself in and found herself face to face with Charles, who had just emerged from the dining-room. "I thought it was your mother," he exclaimed. His voice sounded irritable. There was a set, hard yet worried look upon his face.

"What's wrong?" Vicky asked.

"Nothing."

Vicky looked at him.

"Anne's been here, hasn't she?"

"Yes."

"And I suppose she told you about Terry?"

"It isn't a subject we can discuss. I think you had better go to bed."

Vicky got as far as the staircase before she turned to look back. The little face she turned upon her father was distorted with rage.

"Now you know why I didn't want Anne to go to France," she threw at him. "What the hell has it got to do with her, the little beast!"

And was gone.

II

Virginia coming in a little later found Charles's state of nervous agitation still further advanced.

"Whatever has happened?" she inquired.

"Sit down," said Charles. "I've something to tell you."

"But it's so late. Can't it wait until the morning?"

"My dear Virginia, I've sat up for you because I felt it couldn't. Otherwise I'd have gone to bed long ago. I didn't expect you to be so late."

"But how absurd! You could quite as well have told me in bed," Virginia said, and smiled, thinking of the many complaints and criticisms to which she had listened in that place during the last nine years. But already one part of her mind was saying, as had Vicky's angry tongue: "*Anne*—little beast!" And all the rest: "Bother her! Charles will have a vile headache to-morrow and be upset for days. . . ."

"Very well," she said. "If you must, let's get it over. I'm really rather tired."

"Anne," began Charles, "has thought it her duty . . ."

"Anne *would*," said Virginia.

". . . to tell me something which she thinks we ought to know."

"Some scandal or other about Terry, isn't it?"

"So *you* know about it, too, as well as Vicky? You women are a conspiracy."

Virginia shook her head. "I know nothing about it," she said, "but I always felt there was something and that Vicky knew all about it."

"You never inquired?"

"My dear Charles, why should I? Terry was not in any obvious trouble or in need of sympathy. Whatever it was, and whatever Vicky knew or felt about it, it was her own business. And over."

"In the circumstances I can't possibly agree with you. The story as related by Anne is very far from being her own business."

"What *has* Anne told you?"

"That Terry had an affair—I believe that is the correct modern expression!—over a year ago with a married man. Would *you* have believed she was that kind of girl?"

Virginia felt the blood run up suddenly into her face. The

ground under her feet seemed to shift; the scroll of the years rolled pitilessly back. She put out a hand and steadied herself by the table. So it was this old story, this twice-told, thrice-told tale which had been at the back of everything, which Terry had said she wouldn't mind *her* knowing! She stood there for a moment hanging on to the edge of the table, her face very white.

"Ah, that shocks you, doesn't it?" said Charles. "It shocked me."

"Poor Terry!" said Virginia faintly. (Hadn't it shocked him to hear Anne relate it?)

Charles went to the sideboard, poured out a glass of wine and set it in front of her. "Drink that!" he said. Virginia sat down, twisting the glass in her hands, not speaking. But her heart said, all the time: "Poor Terry! Poor Terry!" as if it would never be done. "A quiet, dignified person like Terry!" Charles ejaculated. "I'd no more have believed it of her than of my own daughter. These girls of to-day! You can know *none* of them!"

Virginia said faintly: "Probably Anne has exaggerated."

Charles swung round upon her.

"Don't console yourself that she was merely repeating gossip, Virginia. She'd taken the trouble to get *facts*." (Anne would, thought Virginia, and smiled a little wintry smile down upon the red wine between her hands.) "She was very upset. Quite terribly shocked." (Virginia's grip upon the stem of her glass stiffened, the little wintry smile ran off her face.) "She wouldn't have spoken, she says, except for the news about Terry and Carl."

"What has that to do with it—or with Anne? She should have held her tongue, anyway. She might have learnt a lesson in decency from Vicky."

"I don't agree with you. Vicky owed it first of all to us, then to Carl, to speak. It was going on while she was in France last year. She knew all about it, but she deliberately kept all mention of it from her letters."

Virginia remembered those letters in which Terry had so mysteriously disappeared and reappeared. Dear Vicky . . .

She said coldly, sipping her wine: "It had no more to do with Vicky than with Anne—only Vicky knew it—and Anne didn't, apparently. Besides, you are condemning unheard. It's grossly unfair. We're not entitled to demand an explanation

of any kind from Terry."

"But Carl is, I think. Carl cannot be allowed to go on with this . . . this understanding . . . in ignorance of such a story."

"Charles!" Virginia twisted round as though she had been struck and faced her outraged husband. "You don't intend to tell Carl?"

"Of course I must tell him."

"But *why*? Oh, Charles, you will not do this thing, please. You're fond of Terry. You admire and respect her—or you did until Anne came here and poisoned your mind. Whatever happened or did not happen in France, it happened to the Terry we'd all known and loved for years. It *can't* take everything you cared for away from her."

Charles shrugged his shoulders.

"It seems to me to leave precious little. People have been deceived before in people they . . . liked. Terry has deceived us. She couldn't possibly have believed I'd have countenanced this business with Carl if she'd told us!"

"That's probably why she didn't. She knew you'd never understand—that you'd think her a person of no character, a modern undesirable."

"Well, so I do!"

"Charles, how terribly wrong you are! Believe me, I do know more about this than you, and I'd stake my life upon Terry—upon her essential integrity and decency."

"Only because your affection for her makes you temporarily lost to all sense of either."

"And yours makes it all the easier for you to condemn. What you hate is that she has failed to come up to your standards . . . your quite arbitrary standards. You're angry because you feel she has 'let you down.'"

"Do you expect me to say it doesn't matter . . . to smile, to connive? To announce, cheerfully, that affairs or no affairs, it's all the same to me?"

"You speak as though the girl has spent the whole of her young life in having them. Who are we to judge, who know nothing of her life save for those few short years here at school . . . those odd months with us? She's probably moved in an idle, vicious circle, imbibed all kinds of false ideas—of romance, freedom, love, heaven knows what."

"A girl of character comes through all that!"

"Nonsense!" said Virginia sharply.

Charles looked at her as if he saw her suddenly for the first time, and as if the sight bereft him of words, he had nothing to say.

It was Virginia who broke the silence: "After all," she said gently, "Vicky has known all the time . . . and it hasn't made any difference to her."

Charles swung round at that: "You women, young and old, hang together."

Virginia pushed away her wine-glass and got up.

"Charles, listen to me. You're doing an unwise as well as a very unkind and ungenerous thing. You'll probably make two people very unhappy. I implore you to wait until Terry comes home before you speak to Carl. She will be back on Tuesday. Let me see her first, Charles, please."

"I'm sorry, Virginia, but I can't do that. I feel it my duty to speak to Carl to-morrow directly he comes home. It's his affair now—not mine or yours. He must deal with Terry."

"Charles, I implore you!"

"You're wasting your time, Virginia. You must please let me do as I think fit. I don't often interfere, but this time you must really allow me to do my duty."

Duty, duty—that miserable whipping-boy of the language! Once again the solid foundation of years trembled beneath Virginia's feet. Back over the silence came the voice of Frances Hussey. Once again black despair, like a river in flood, swept down upon her.

Duty, duty. . . . All these wretched little Gregers Werles for ever babbling of morality and the ideal!

"Charles . . . if I ask you . . . if this were the last thing I should ever ask of you on earth . . .?"

"But it isn't. Don't be melodramatic, my dear. It isn't like you."

"Charles—leave it alone. Do nothing."

"You must know that is out of the question. If it were Vicky, my own daughter, and some other man, I couldn't do that."

There was a long pause. Charles went to the window and stood there with his back to her. Moonlight streamed into the room, making a dancing pattern upon the carpet, and a frame for Charles's broad figure. Virginia's voice followed him.

"Charles—once years ago, in a day which nobody called modern, I knew a girl . . . as young as Terry . . . younger . . . who did what you say Anne says Terry did. She was a very foolish, badly-brought-up young person—romantic, ignorant, but she wasn't wicked, nor depraved, though there were plenty of people to tell her she was. She was, in fact, chock-full of ideals and standards and nobilities . . ."

Charles turned round from the window. "Then if not wickedness nor slackness nor lack of character, what *is* it that makes a young girl do a thing like that? And Terry has done more. She has turned her back upon the adventure when it palled or came to an end, and calmly engaged herself, without a word, to an unsuspecting, clean-living young man. I *can't* understand that."

"I can," said Virginia.

She looked at her husband very quietly and steadily. She knew suddenly what she was going to do. She could not bear that he should spoil Terry's life, her chances of happiness, in the way that hers had been spoiled. She was ready to take Terry on trust—to know of this thing only what Terry wanted to tell her, and she could not endure the thought that Carl should hear this story of Anne's in Charles's brutal fashion. She remembered with a sorrowful little pang how all those years ago she had suffered at the thought of her Aunt Frances hammering Richard on the head with her blunderbuss of "facts"—Richard, so young, so full of ideals, whom she loved. The memory of that journey, that mad journey in Sunday-ridden England which she had taken to intercept the blow, threaded her mind to-night like a bright ribbon; and her heart quailed at the thought of the blow she must deal Charles. She could not bear hurting people. She was tempted to put it off until the morning, for Carl was not expected home until dinner-time. She wanted respite, time to gather more strength, softer and wiser, less hurtful words. Moreover, in the morning Charles might have changed his mind, might be willing to hold his hand. But she dare not chance that, for she knew that she would not have the courage in the morning. What she was going to do she must do now. She closed her eyes, took a long breath, opened them again and said:

"You see, Charles—that other girl was . . . myself."

III

For a moment she thought he was going to faint, then that he was going to be sick. He turned a strange, unreal colour and sat down, hiding his face in his hands. Virginia stood there looking down upon him, hardening her heart.

"I never meant you to know. . . . There seemed no reason why you should—until now. . . ."

Charles listened to that old story of a false-hearted Spring without sign that he heard, and at the end he still held his head in his hands, his elbows supported on his knees, as if at any moment he might be sick.

"Charles . . . have I been a bad wife to you?"

He shook his head without moving his hands or looking up at her, and after a little while, quite empty of words, she went away and left him.

Dawn was slipping in between the London trees when he came at length to bed, to lie very straight and still on his own side of the bed. After a while she twisted her head and stole a glance at him. His face was like the grey dawn: his eyes shut. Something sharp went through her heart. She was suddenly and terribly reminded of that day all those years ago when Charles looked like this for so long that she thought he was dying, that never again would he open his eyes and smile at her. She turned now and took his head upon her breast. Neither spoke, and presently she knew that he slept.

In the morning she saw she had nothing to fear; that he would say nothing to Carl; that he would leave her to see Terry.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

TERRY rang up in the middle of the afternoon on the day of her return and asked Virginia to come to tea.

Virginia left home early and went first for a short walk in the Park, where October was already busy running her golden beads upon the string of the year. And there she met Anne's nurse-maid with Anne's two small children. She stood a short while talking to them and wondering a little what they would be like when they grew up. Children were a lottery. Who would have supposed that Sylvia would have had a daughter like Anne? Virginia's heart was hot against Anne. She could not bear the thought of her. Anne had taken so much—all that care and effort upon Terry's part to send her beautifully equipped to France—and had brought back only treachery. If you told Anne that, she would raise her thin, pencilled eyebrows and say: "But I *paid* Terry for what she did for me. That was a matter of business, not friendship." And Terry, Virginia knew, would agree with her. She'd not like you to think that she had tried to buy Anne's silence. . . . Virginia said good-bye to the girl and her charges and hurried on.

Terry was waiting for her when she arrived. Vicky, she said, had rung her up that morning and told her.

"About Anne, you mean?"

"Yes, about Anne."

Terry's ivory pallor was a little more pronounced, perhaps, than usual, but she looked as cool and self-possessed as ever, and not in the least like a young woman whose guilty secret had been surprised. In her simple silk frock of that "natural" shade of which she was so fond, she looked so fresh and untouched that Anne's story seemed suddenly like a tale told by an idiot.

"I thought," Terry said, "after you've had some tea, that I'd like to tell you Anne's story myself."

They had tea, then Terry fetched cigarettes and put them down at Virginia's side. Virginia shook her head.

"May I?" Terry asked, and then, as she lit up: "You knew, didn't you, that there was *something*? Something, I mean, that

Vicky knew—and found upsetting.”

“Yes. I once overheard you tell Vicky that you’d not mind my knowing.”

“I always felt that way about it. I was always so certain you would understand. I suppose Charles doesn’t—not even the least little bit?”

“I’m afraid he doesn’t.”

“And yet, you know, it seemed the most natural thing in the world when it happened. I must have done it in a kind of ecstasy . . . rather, I suppose, as people went to the stake, all very clear-eyed and certain. I’d do the same thing again if the circumstances were the same. I don’t believe in second chances, do you?”

Virginia shook her head.

“No, you can only react to given circumstances as your temperament and character dictate. *Not in our stars, dear Brutus . . .*”

“I know. . . . It’s something, I suppose, not to have cried for another chance—to have known quite definitely I’d have done nothing with it, so far as this thing is concerned. It had to happen—given the circumstances and me—and Raoul. It was just part of my life—of my human lot. I saw that I had to get a sense of perspective about it. Do you know what I mean?”

Virginia said: “That it was the beginning and not the end as you’d probably thought? Yes, my dear, I understand that perfectly.”

“Bless you,” Terry said and went on: “You see, I’d known Raoul as long as I can remember. His mother and mine were friends, and we were constantly at each other’s houses. He was half-French, half-English, and several years older than I was—eight or nine. Not handsome, but very attractive, definitely sexually attractive. But I think I’d always adored him—long before I knew that. I remember how I cried when he went into the War in its last year. . . . He must have been about twenty then: I was a child, of course. When the War was over I came to England, as you know, to school, and I scarcely saw him again until I went back for good, in ’twenty-four, wasn’t it? His mother had died and he had suddenly become very wealthy. I didn’t know until afterwards that all that insistence upon mother’s part suddenly about my return was because she wanted me to marry him. There was another girl, and she thought, if I

really tried, I could cut her out. But I was too late even to try. When I got home he'd been married three months. They were staying in Cannes—I met them a good deal and I thought my heart was broken. My mother was very scornful, and to put an end to a silly romance, as she thought it, found me several excellent prospective husbands. But, as I couldn't have Raoul, I didn't want anybody. I wanted a job—something to do. That, of course, was unheard of. My mother gave up sending Raoul and his wife invitations, and redoubled her efforts in other directions. It wasn't any use."

Terry stubbed her cigarette carefully and said quietly: "Nothing was. The die was cast. I used to think I'd remember that night Raoul first kissed me as long as I lived. . . . You see, no man ever had. I wasn't what was known as the 'kissing sort' . . . I wish I could tell this story more briefly."

"Just go on," said Virginia.

"It was a wonderful night. We were members of a house-party of Phyl's—there was a moon and a lovely garden, and Raoul and I were there alone. . . . Already it was beginning to be accepted that Raoul and his wife were not asked about together . . . and that we were. Nobody cared. It seemed to me afterwards that everybody must have done their best to throw us together. Phyl often asked us to stay with her—she'd always wanted me to marry Raoul. Standards weren't strict, and if a marriage wasn't a success you put an end to it and began again with somebody else. But at that time I don't think I was very conscious of this. I wanted to be with Raoul, and nothing else mattered. For a long time just to be with him was enough. He was unhappy—and I could make him happy. . . . I honestly believe that, then, was all I saw. I enjoyed, to the full, all the romance, all the thrill, of a hopeless love-affair. I was buoyed up to heaven by all sorts of ideas of renunciation and sublimity. My feet weren't on the earth at all. . . . I'm trying to be quite honest about this, for, you see, I wasn't ignorant. I'd been brought up in a fast set where ideals and illusions weren't common currency. Perhaps that was why I clung to mine so tenaciously for so long. And I remember how shocked I was when I discovered that everybody—including Raoul's wife—believed that we were already lovers. The idea of a love that was *sub rosa* filled me with disgust that, as it happened, precipitated things."

"I'd cried a bit about it all, I think, on Raoul's shoulder that evening. I wanted, I said, to end everything, to go away and never see him again. I don't know whether I was hysterical or renunciatory—or both. It ended by Raoul saying he would ask his wife to divorce him and then we could get married. It seems horrible to me now to remember how calmly I accepted that—how it comforted and satisfied me. Two days later I saw him again. His wife, he said, had not the slightest intention of divorcing him—had refused altogether.

"We lost our heads that night completely. . . . The wreck of my ideals was absolute. All the same, I'm not going to blame Raoul. If he wanted me, I wanted him just as much. We'd had so many opportunities, he could have taken them before if he'd wanted.

"After that first time there was, quite simply, no secret about it."

Terry stopped, lighted another cigarette, and said:

"It's getting dark. Shall I turn on the light?"

"No," said Virginia. "Just go on with your story."

II

"Then," said Terry, "Vicky came out. I've since thought Mrs. Garstin did that on purpose. She thought Vicky might . . . somehow . . . stop me. As though she could! Nobody could have done it—and Vicky was a good deal too late. For a little while she suspected nothing. I didn't want Vicky to know. There were difficulties just then, too, and Raoul and I saw very little of each other. I let her talk about that Dancing School scheme. . . . Then somebody told her things. She came asking me to deny them. I didn't. I never thought of denying them. I wanted her—I wanted her most dreadfully!—to see it all as something real and splendid, as I did. She didn't, not for a single moment. I have never seen anyone so . . . disgusted as Vicky. It was the last thing she had expected of me, you see. She was terribly hurt and terribly unflinching. We began to see less of each other. Then Raoul took a villa—really a very small house—at Antibes, and I announced that whenever he was there I should go to him.

"It created, of course, a mild scandal, even in my mother's set. Really, this sort of thing wasn't done. I was made to feel that

this parade of banners and drums was not at all *de rigueur*. One managed without—one had one's affairs and one kept quiet about them. I was convicted, silently, of bad taste. . . . But I wanted everybody, I suppose, to be aware that I was not having an 'affair'—that I despised 'affairs.' This was love, the real thing and everlasting, with Fate holding the trump card against us. I suppose I thought it rather fine to have the courage of my convictions. I don't 'suppose.' I *did* think it. All for love and the world well lost. . . . I was eighteen and nobody had ever been in love before! It was a most wonderful world. I was happy for the first time in my life—happier than I'd ever imagined possible.

"There was one time when for whole weeks Raoul and I hardly saw each other. We never wrote to each other, either. We met occasionally in other people's houses, and when he could get away I went and stayed with him openly at Antibes. There were long gaps between these occasions. I trusted Raoul absolutely—there were, I knew, innumerable difficulties. I was content to wait. I had no qualms, no doubts. The doubts all belonged to Vicky. All the time.

"From the first she was a lot clearer-sighted than I was. She saw through Raoul long before I did. All the time she would have it that he didn't want a divorce: that his wife winked at his peccadilloes and he at hers. As for Raoul and me—he was only amusing himself, and I was a little fool. Vicky and I did really quarrel about that. . . . I wish you'd smoke, Aunt Jinny. . . ."

Still Virginia shook her head. Terry took and lighted another cigarette before she took up the thread of her story again.

"Vicky was right. Two months later Raoul was involved in a motor accident at Rambouillet. The girl with whom he had been spending the week-end there was killed."

"My poor child!" said Virginia softly.

Terry went on speaking, still in that quiet, perfectly natural voice, as though it were somebody else's story or a story strange and unreal, if you like, but one she knew so well that it had even ceased to amaze her. And yet to Virginia, remembering the youthful Terry, with her mind so intimately acquainted with this quiet, dignified young girl who had come back to them from France, the thing had a nightmarish impossibility, as it had had all those years ago when, just as quietly, she had unfolded just such another story to somebody else.

"I was at the villa that week-end—and expecting Raoul. He had sent me a wire on the Saturday afternoon to say he could not get away, after all, but would come on as early as possible on Monday morning. What I got on Monday was the news of the accident in the morning papers. They had it wrongly—the girl was supposed to be his wife. . . . I didn't know the truth until two days later."

"Oh, Terry, how dreadful for you!"

"I thought I should have died of it. I stayed at the villa for two or three days, then I packed up and went back. People weren't particularly scandalized, but they were sorry for me. My mother, of course, was angry. She thought I'd played my cards badly. The prospective husbands retreated. She told me I'd spoiled my chances by my idiocy. That was how she saw it—as plain idiocy. But Vicky cried. I'd never seen Vicky cry before: somehow I hadn't thought she could. . . . I don't know what I should have done without Vicky."

"I don't know when it first came to me that this thing that had happened to me didn't matter as much as I had thought, down there at Antibes, that it did. Quite suddenly something in me rebelled from all the pity and sympathy people lavished on me as though I were spoiled, finished, done for. The only thing that seemed to be wrong with me was the result of finding that something I'd thought the most wonderful thing in life was merely unspeakably cheap and tawdry. If it had been what I thought it, nothing could have made it look like that. I didn't hate Raoul. I had no feeling of anger or hatred for him. I even came, presently, to feel a kind of gratitude to him as a kind of liberal education. That shocked Vicky. She couldn't in the least understand it, but I feel, somehow, that you can."

Virginia nodded: "He'd shown you the difference between the real and the counterfeit."

"Yes, that was it, I think. He'd made it impossible for me to make that mistake again." She turned and looked for a moment at the quiet figure sitting opposite her there in the dusk. "How well you understand, Aunt Jinny!"

Virginia said nothing, but her smile and the little gesture that wavered across the dusk invited Terry to go on.

"Nobody did, then—not even Vicky. You see, while everybody around was so certain I was finished—and what a pity it was!—I suddenly understood that I'd only just begun . . . that the

whole of life was in front and not behind. Once I'd recovered from the shock I just couldn't see, you know, that the incident deserved quite as much fuss as everybody was making of it. But when I told Vicky that, she thought I'd grown cynical—casual—and that I didn't *care*. Even to-day she doesn't properly understand. She thinks I'm *queer*. . . . But I don't believe I am. When I feel very conceited I think it's the other people who are. Somehow or other I'd acquired a clarity of vision about things. That was all. Things had a different value. The emphasis was in a different place, and I found myself rejecting, one after the other, all the assumptions and generalizations I'd been brought up upon about men and women."

Suddenly, across the dusk, Terry's soft laugh floated.

"It's funny how hard the world has found it to forgive me for not trailing a broken heart about—for making it so evident that there wasn't a broken heart at all. It was prepared to take me to its bosom as the poor betrayed female who staked everything—and lost—for love. But somehow I didn't feel I'd staked everything, nor that I'd lost so very much, after all. I saw so very clearly that from the beginning there had been something wrong about that business with Raoul—something false, something that promised blossom and fruit of fulfilment and never, never could possibly have produced any of these things."

False Spring . . . false Spring. . . . The phrase went through Virginia's heart as a sighing wind through reeds.

"I knew that it had only happened to me because of something that had made it possible, that invited it. I don't mean just my youth and inexperience, but just some mood, some attitude to life, which my character and my circumstances had united to induce in me. Vicky had youth and not very much experience of life—less than I had had by a good deal; but such a thing could never have happened to Vicky. Out there among all that cheap emotion and false romance, all those tawdry ideals and ambitions, she was like something from another world. Nothing ever touched her. There was a magic circle around her. Looking at Vicky, I knew that if I'd been brought up as she had been, nothing would have touched me either.

"The one thing I would not believe was that I had to go on paying, for ever; that one never really recovers from a mistake of that sort. I couldn't accept that even from Vicky. . . . I expect she gets that from Charles, doesn't she? Sex ought not

to matter so much—so much more than anything else. That incident with Raoul was just one little bit of life, one little bit of my human experience. For the life of me I couldn't see it in any other way. I knew I'd got to go with life."

Terry stopped, and when she spoke again her voice had another note in it that Virginia had never heard before, that made her want to get up and put her arms around her.

"I wasn't very easy at first. I rather thought I was going to have a child. I'd wanted one, you see, so badly—back there, I mean, when I'd been so happy. That was why I wouldn't definitely promise Vicky to come back with her. She was on the eve of starting when I knew, quite definitely, the symptoms were false. Just shock, the doctor, who knew all about it, said. Vicky sent a wire to you and made me pack up at once and come back with her."

"My poor child!" said Virginia gently. Her heart was wrung with pity. She did not like to think of Terry, disillusioned, bewildered, waiting to know if life was going to do this thing to her or not.

"Poor Vicky!" said Terry. "I always feel she had so much worse a time over it all than I did. She could not bear what I did . . . she could not bear the thought that you . . . any of you . . . should know. The very idea of the poor baby was agony to her. And the knowledge that Carl and I liked each other so instantaneously. That I could like anybody else . . . after *that* . . . I think she thought I was making a habit of it. She couldn't bear it and she couldn't bear the idea of Anne going to France and possibly finding things out. - She knew what Anne would make of it. To Anne I'd be just casual, wanton. . . . Even Vicky knew I wasn't that."

"I'm sure she did . . ."

Virginia was proud of Vicky and of her part in this story. She sat for a little space thinking of her.

"Terry, tell me this," she said presently. "Why did Mrs. Garstin take Anne back with her?"

"Out of pure kindness. I don't suppose she ever thought of me in the matter. It wouldn't occur to her that even if Anne heard things she would believe them—or go ferreting around. You see, she thought Anne was a friend of mine. And there were the dresses. She'd think *they'd* have shut Anne's mouth quite finally. Though why should it—if Anne wanted to open

it? Anne would tell you she paid for the clothes."

"There's no excuse for Anne," Virginia said, "none at all. I wouldn't have believed it, even of her."

Terry shrugged her shoulders and got up suddenly. She turned up the light and began to draw the curtains.

"Anne would never understand. She'd merely see in me an abandoned, immoral creature deceiving a lot of decent people. She'd never understand that I didn't see myself that way at all, that I wasn't a person with a bad conscience. I expect this sounds as level-headed to you as it did to Vicky, but, you see, I *am* a level-headed person really. I was level-headed about Raoul. I knew what I was doing and I *wanted* to do it. But I was wrong, all the same."

She finished with the curtains and came across to Virginia. For a moment they stood looking at each other, very quietly, very steadily. In Virginia's breast pity for Terry moved up and down like a living thing in pain, but into her eyes admiration had climbed and sat there. She put her arms tightly round the girl and kissed her. Suddenly her face was wet with Terry's tears.

III

"There's Carl, of course," Virginia said presently. "Do you care for him very much, Terry?"

"Terribly, Aunt Jinny."

Virginia smiled at the word.

"You've no doubts at all?"

"None. I used to like him when we were children together. Don't you remember the day I thought he'd be drowned at Porteath when he went out after Rannie? I don't know what he does to me, Aunt Jinny, but I know that he will always be able to do it. He's the other bit of myself—I never have to explain things to Carl. He understands. He's quite a big person."

Yes, thought Virginia, but would he be big enough to understand this? He was young, and young men, she knew . . . young men in love. . . . She said:

"Charles thought he ought to know of this . . . but I persuaded him to wait until I had seen you. I don't want Carl's life spoiled, or yours—if it can be helped."

"That was dear of you, Aunt Jinny. But, you know, I don't think Carl's life will be spoiled, or mine. Carl isn't like most young men—he has absolutely none of their usual ideas about

women or morality. I don't know how he's managed it, but I suspect, darling, he gets it from you."

"My dear, I hope he will understand this."

"He does, Aunt Jinny."

"You mean—you've *told* him?"

"Oh yes—long ago, soon after we found out about ourselves. And I nearly told you, too—Carl wanted me to."

"My dear Terry, that was very brave of you!"

"Not with Carl. With most other men, perhaps. The Fates were kind to make it Carl. I owe them something for that. When I told him that Anne had gone to France and would probably know all about it when she came back, he insisted upon seeing Charles and telling him we considered ourselves engaged. And that's all the effect Anne's expedition will have upon either of us, I expect."

Virginia sat very still. For the second time in her life she had told this story of a false Spring for no purpose whatever. For the second time it had been able to interfere with something very dear to her. Richard's youthful romantic love. Charles's mature belief and trust. And on neither occasion need she have spoken. Life was a little bit comic, after all, and she, in the ultimate resort, Time's fool.

She felt very tired as she got up to go, and shook her head at Terry's suggestion that she should let her take her out of town in the car and have dinner somewhere on the road. "Not to-night, Terry . . . I must get home," she said, and knew she wanted to see how far the shadow she had flung so unnecessarily over her life had lifted—or, rather, how much it continued to darken the threshold. She wished she could stop being sorry for Charles.

"Good-bye, my dear," she said, "and thank you for telling me this."

"I've tired you out."

"No, no. . . . That was Anne. She gave us a bad night, I'm afraid."

Terry put her arms about Virginia's neck and held her so for a moment.

"You've been very sweet to me," she said. "I'll never forget it. . . ."

"My dear, my dear . . ." said Virginia, and it was her own tears, this time, which wetted her face.

IV

"Mrs. Shelley to see you, ma'am," said the maid as Virginia put her key in the door and stepped into the hall. "In the drawing-room."

She found Sylvia Shelley sitting alone there with a book.

"Hallo, Virginia," she said. "I was afraid I'd have to go before you arrived."

They kissed each other, Virginia took off her hat and threw it down with her gloves upon the table.

"I can guess why you've come," she said.

"Anne? Yes. She was good enough to come and have tea with me this afternoon. How much harm has she done? I've seen Charles—and I know all about *that*. What else?"

"Nothing else. Carl knows."

"Has Terry told him?"

"Long ago. . . ."

"And he behaved as a young aspirant for biological honours might have been expected to behave. I didn't expect that to occur to Anne—but why didn't it occur to you, Virginia?"

"I don't know," said Virginia, "but it didn't."

"And you gave yourself all that trouble with Charles for nothing!"

"How is Charles?"

"All right. I've been talking to him. He'll be quite better soon. But I'm afraid you've lost your halo for ever. You know, Jinny, you always were a little precipitate. Nobody could ever really stop you from spoiling the look of the things you valued."

"I know," said Virginia, oppressed with the thought that she had had one more emotional scene that was quite unnecessary, and aware that for the second time in her life her instincts had betrayed her. Terry now—and Sylvia before her—were wiser than she. Why had she known Carl—her own son—so much less well than they? But Sylvia, certainly, had always known more than she had about most things. She looked at her now—fifty-eight, a grandmother, the mother of the unspeakable Anne—and found her as admirable as ever. But did she, Virginia wondered, know as much about Anne as she, Virginia, did? Virginia, at least, so she flattered herself, had always known the truth about Sylvia's daughter.

"What are we going to *do* about Anne?" she asked.

"Nothing can be done about Anne," Sylvia replied quietly. "I've always known that. Anne is dreadful."

"Oh, Sylvia. . . !"

"Well, isn't she? She's everything I'd rather not think a woman could be."

"It's queer—a modern and your daughter!"

"My daughter, yes. But not a modern. I've told you that before. Anne's merely contemporary. Charles, of course, doesn't acknowledge the difference. He prefers to say that Anne is old-fashioned." Sylvia laughed. "Rather like us, in fact!"

Virginia laughed, too, just a little.

"Poor Charles!" she said. "I hope you let him down lightly."

"Lightly enough. But I think he did understand, before I'd done, that for all the benighted age we were born in, we knew, at Anne's age, lots of things she and her like will never know."

"Ah, you!" said Virginia, "you were wonderful!"

"Nonsense . . . but I think our friendship has been, rather. And friendship does seem, perhaps, to be one of the things this generation knows very little about. *Vide Anne.*"

"But *vide*, also, I think, Vicky. Vicky and Terry."

"Ah, Vicky, bless her," said Sylvia. "Nice to have Vicky for a daughter."

"I think so," said Virginia, just as the door opened and that young woman came in. Slim, shingled, Terry-clad, clear-eyed, long-legged, moving like a thoroughbred.

"Hallo, mother," she said, and stopped upon seeing Sylvia. "How are you, Mrs. Shelley? Shall I come back?"

"No, stay, child, stay. I'm going home to my dinner," Sylvia said. "I'm hungry. The wretched Anne quite spoiled my tea."

"The *unspeakable* Anne!" said Vicky. "I don't see how she can be your daughter, Mrs. Shelley!"

"I've just been discussing that interesting point with your mother, my child. But I agree with your adjective. It was Anne's 'unspeakableness' I came to apologize for. But I've taken much too long about it. Good-bye, Vicky. Come and see us again soon. Good-bye, Jinny, my dear."

Vicky offered her cheek; then stood on one side and watched Virginia and Sylvia's good-bye. It touched her quite inexpressibly, she found, to remember how long these two had been friends. Years and years before she or Carl or Rannie had been

born or thought of, when her mother was little more than a girl, no older than she. She saw that long intimacy running through the years like a bright thread, binding them together, keeping them in shape. It made a feeling of warmth, a little sunny patch in her mind.

"Sorry I barged in like that, mother," she said when she and Virginia were alone. "I've just been talking to Terry on the 'phone and I wanted to say 'thank you.'"

"For going to see Terry?"

"No—for understanding. Better than I did. . . . And for washing Anne out."

"You seem, my dear, to have Anne rather on your mind. And yet, you know, she matters so very little, after all. Even here."

"I know," said Vicky, "but I can't stop hating her just yet, all the same. . . . Perhaps I wouldn't mind so much if she didn't happen to be Michael's sister."

"I don't think that troubles Michael very much, does it?"

"No, but it troubles me. You see, some day I've got to have her as my sister, too."

There was a little pause before Virginia said: "Some day—soon, Vicky?"

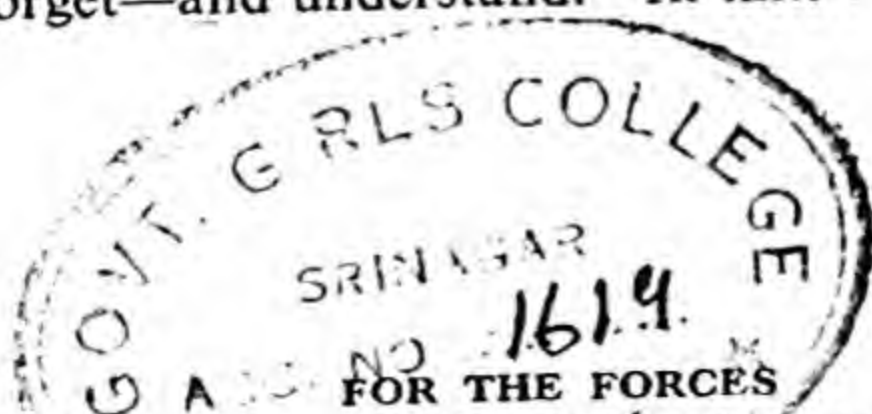
"No, not very. Michael's got lots of exams. first. We're not engaged or anything like that, darling. Probably never shall be. Some day we shall just go out and get married. I'm afraid father won't like that very much."

Virginia laughed.

"Well, luckily we don't have to bother him with that just yet," she said. "And at least he likes Michael!"

"And Anne—still! Think of it! Do you believe he'll ever like Terry as well again? Sometimes I think he'll never forgive her—or me. That's when I hate Anne most of all."

"Let us hope," said Virginia quietly, "that he will forgive us all—and forget—and understand. In time . . ."



Leave this book at a Post Office when you have read it, so that men and women in the Services may enjoy it too.

